

A Day of Holy Conversation

Wiles Chapel, Newberry College

February 6, 2010

Dr. Susan W. McArver

Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary



I want to thank Bishop Yoos and the Synod Council for convening this Day of Holy Conversation for us all. What I would like to present this morning in the time allotted to me is less a definitive statement than a sharing of a larger, ongoing journey and conversation, and my remarks need to be taken in that light.

I knew I was in trouble one Sunday late last August when my eighty-something year old parents called and invited me over for Sunday dinner. This in and of itself was not that unusual, but what **was** unusual was arriving to the dining room table and finding an article from *The State* newspaper sitting at my place. There, in bold headlines, it proclaimed, “Lutherans Extend Ordination to Gays, Lesbians”. Inflammatory, and often inaccurate, passages from the newspaper article were marked – vigorously - in yellow highlighter. As I sat down to table, the questions came practically before grace had been said: “What in the world is going on? Is this true? What is happening to my church?!”

I took a deep breath. “You know,” I said, “this is a difficult, complicated issue. But I’ll start with this: the very first homosexual people I ever knew . . . were members of our Lutheran congregation growing up.” My father, bless his heart, looked shocked. My mother, however, after a pause, nodded her head.

I grew up in a congregation in this synod much like many others – lots of young families, **lots** of young children (we were the baby boomers, after all). And in that close-knit and happy church circle were a few boys and girls who seemed a little “different,” but not that much. We were all baptized together, confirmed together, sang in the children’s choir together, attended Luther League together, took communion together, and eventually served on church council and church committees together.

As we all aged, however, some of them came to understand themselves as something “other,” and we sometimes had long discussions about it. At first, the talks frankly made me a bit uncomfortable: to enter into such difficult and painful conversations with someone who was “that way,” just felt . . . weird . . .

What I learned through those conversations over time, however, didn’t teach me much about homosexuality itself – but they did teach me a lot about human loneliness, the depths of the human struggle, the human need for God in the midst of that struggle, and the deep, deep desire of these friends to remain faithful Christians in the midst of painful discoveries about who they were amid the messiness of real life.

My journey of the road of “the church and homosexuality” began in those long-ago conversations. It is a journey I still travel, with uncertainty, with care, and with humility. As I think of these friends – many of whom are still in the church, but some of whom who have left – and as I think of others I have encountered over the years who have come and gone, I am humbled by the courage of those who have remained in a church, in a faith, that clearly at times has told them they are not welcome. I confess before you today, that I am not sure I would have had that kind of courage.

In my portion of this conversation this morning, I cannot address all of the questions and concerns that have been raised over the last few months. But I take seriously – and am comforted by – the understanding that this is “a” day of holy conversation - not the only day, not even the most important day - and I hope fervently that it will continue. Because of the constraints of time, none of the issues I raise today can be addressed in all of their fullness, but I believe they are important to at least lift up for consideration in our conversation.

First, I’d like to consider briefly what the ELCA actually passed at the August 2009 Churchwide Assembly, so that we can all have a shared understanding of what we are and are not talking about.

The Churchwide Assembly, made up of representatives from each of the sixty-five synods of the ELCA, voted on recommendations that have been studied, considered, prayed over, and worried over for over twenty years. The recommendations that were passed did not come suddenly or out of the blue. They were voted on by pastors and lay people from all across the spectrum, just like our gathering here – indeed, by some of the very people sitting here in this Chapel this morning. Before the Assembly, our delegates studied, gathered, and prayed over the work that had been done for so many years. At the Assembly itself, they studied, gathered, and prayed – often – about the vote they would be taking. I think we need to be reminded of this – in some of the rhetoric I have been hearing lately, these good and faithful people who voted at Assembly have been treated in ways that are unfair, uncharitable, and unhelpful.

In the final votes, the Churchwide Assembly passed both a new social statement, “Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust,” and four resolutions related to ministry policies in the ELCA. Two of these resolutions state:

1) “That the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to **allow congregations that choose to do so** to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships” (emphasis added).

2) “That the ELCA commit itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church.”

Two other resolutions, however, recognizing that the church was not of one mind on this issue, called on the church to “allow structured flexibility” in the decision-making process regarding candidates for ministry and “to make provision in its policies to recognize the conviction of members who believe that this church should not call or roster people” in such relationships.¹

Of many things that could be said about these actions, I would like to highlight only two. First, the social statement approved by the church clearly defines marriage as between one man and one woman. While congregations who wish to do so may explore options for providing some type of service of blessing for same sex couples, marriage is not an option – it is reserved for one man and one woman.

Second, the resolutions do not **mandate or require** that congregations call a homosexual pastor **or** bless a same-sex union. Unlike some other denominations, such as the Methodists, for example, Lutheran congregations call their own pastors - we do not have them appointed for us. Under these resolutions, a congregation **may** decide that a homosexual person with certain ministry gifts – who is in a publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous same-gendered relationship - may also be the best possible match for the ministry needs of their congregation in their particular time and their particular context and may call that person as their pastor. Perhaps you cannot imagine that for your own congregation. Perhaps I cannot imagine it for mine. But perhaps another congregation can. What is NOT permitted, of either homosexual or heterosexual pastors and other rostered leaders is promiscuity - of any kind.

That’s the first issue – to understand what our conversation is about. The second issue clearly lies at the heart of much of our holy conversation today in our discussion and in our resolutions – the issue of biblical authority. Some of the rhetoric I have heard in recent months accuses the ELCA of a rejection of biblical authority, and that is a serious charge.

I am a church historian, not a biblical scholar, which is why I need – and **all** of us need – people who are such scholars to teach us before we jump to our own conclusions. Dr. Brian Peterson of our Seminary is one of many such persons who has devoted his life

¹ Resolutions related to Ministry Policies, as Adopted by the 2009 Churchwide Assembly. At this writing, Draft Amendments related to the work of synodical candidacy committees propose language allowing for the following types of “structured flexibility”: “A synodical candidacy committee may, but is not required to, work with a person who is in a publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationship”; “People who represent the diversity of ELCA conviction on this matter are welcome to serve and will be supported in their service on the candidacy committees of this church”; and “a transfer of [a] candidate to another synod may be considered” if the “diversity of faith-based opinions on these matters” among committee members “has the potential to distract from the discernment and decision process.” *Candidacy Manual Amendments – draft 011910*. These and other documents are available from <http://www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Vocation/Rostered-Leadership/Ministry-Policies.aspx#assembly>

and call to the service of the church in the study of the New Testament. I will not duplicate here his thoughtful, careful work – it is available in two excellent articles posted on the South Carolina Synod’s website. But I think it is helpful to summarize briefly some of his significant points.²

In his articles, Dr. Peterson examines several types of texts that are commonly used to condemn same-sex relationships. His very careful and scholarly reading of the passages most often cited finds that the types of sexual activity talked about in passages such as in Leviticus and Paul are more directed at sexual promiscuity, idol worship, or sexual abuse than the types of relationships we are talking about here – persons who are in lifelong, committed relationships.

In addition, while examining the oft-cited Leviticus texts, Dr. Peterson reminds us that Leviticus is filled with prohibitions – not just against same-gender intercourse, but against eating certain foods, wearing clothing made of two types of material, against having sexual intercourse with one’s wife during certain phases of the menstrual cycle, etc. One could add to his list that Leviticus commands men to marry the widow of their brother, and grants permission to stone an unruly teenage son – surely a tempting prospect some days, but upon further reflection, probably not a good idea.

Even in his examination of the Creation accounts, Dr. Peterson points out that things are not quite as uncomplicated as they might at first appear. Even if, for example, “the creation account does point to, honor and bless the marriage between one man and one woman,”³ the reality is that for much of the Old Testament period, polygamy was widely practiced. All of the patriarchs practiced it – often, quite frankly, to their detriment. In addition, for centuries, based on the Creation accounts, the church taught that the greatest and “only valid use of sexual intercourse was to ‘be fruitful and multiply -’”⁴ the concept of sexual activity for “enjoyment” was considered sinful. What does this mean, asks Dr. Peterson, for those who choose to limit the number of children they have, or not to have children at all?

The question obviously becomes then – how **has** the church, and how **does** the church decide which of these rulings to keep and which to leave aside? The problem comes, I think, when we uncritically reject any consideration of the biblical context and appeal instead to the “plain sense of Scripture” - as if this was self-evident in all times and in all places. Exactly what do we mean by that “plain sense” and how far can we push that? What is very clear to me as a church historian is that what is the plain sense of Scripture in one generation is not necessarily the plain sense in another – or even within the same generation.

Martin Luther found this out the hard way. Luther was absolutely convinced that if lay people had the Bible to read for themselves, in their own language, then everyone

² Dr. Peterson has made two presentations on this subject, both of which are found on the South Carolina Synod’s website, <http://sclutheran.org/ELCA-CWA-RESOURCES/CWA-2009-decision-resources.htm>: *The Bible, The Church, and Faithful Discernment* and *Faithful Discernment in the ELCA: Further Thoughts*. References to Dr. Peterson’s work in this presentation refer to those two documents.

³ Peterson, *Faithful Discernment*, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*

could finally see what it said – and agree on its interpretation. I think one of the biggest shocks to Luther of the entire Protestant Reformation was that this did not happen. People began reading the Bible for themselves and sometimes came to quite different conclusions about what it said and meant.

And that’s what gets lost, I think, in some of these discussions. The charge has been made that in this decision, the ELCA has simply capitulated to secular culture. But in almost **every** generation, the church has had to make hard decisions as it has faced new information or a new context. What has seemed absolutely critical to one generation is of practically no importance whatsoever to another. Since the very first generation of Christians, these choices have had to be made – and they have sometimes been made well, and sometimes quite poorly. At its best, what the church has tried to do through all of these issues is discover in the Scriptures the biblical principle that can inform its life in its present. Not as a way of “getting around” Scripture, but as a faithful application of what the Bible is saying to us in the present.

For example, the Old Testament rule that a brother should marry his brother’s widow made infinite sense in a culture where women had few options, little economic power, and needed physical protection. But in later cultures, this type of regulation no longer served such a necessary purpose. Was it an unfaithful reading of Scripture or a denial of biblical authority to decide that perhaps, despite clear texts in the Scriptures commanding it, the concept of polygamy and insisting that a widow marry her dead husband’s brother could be left behind? Or was the faithful, biblical principle maintained that stable family life was God’s desire for the community?

For thousands of years, Jews, Christians and others believed that the earth stood as the center of the universe, and passages such as the one in which Joshua commanded the sun to stand still so he could defeat the Israelites’ enemies were used to support that belief. But then Copernicus, Johannes Kepler, and Galileo demonstrated that the earth, in fact, revolved around the sun. Was it an unfaithful reading of Scripture, a denial of biblical authority, to adjust the church’s entire perception of the cosmos? Or could this new information be accepted as part of a new way of understanding the faithful, biblical principle that God created heaven and earth?

In the 19th century, our ancestors – **my** ancestors – argued that slavery was in accord with “the plain sense of Scripture.” Not only was slavery clearly allowed in the Bible, it was commanded and regulated by it. But although it had been in existence for thousands of years, by 1865, it was clear that slavery in North America was over, and southern Christians were forced to conclude that perhaps the plain sense of Scripture on this issue had not been so plain after all. Was it an unfaithful reading of Scripture, a denial of biblical authority, to accept that their defense of slavery had been misplaced? Or did they rediscover the faithful, biblical principle of gospel freedom found in the life, ministry and teachings of Jesus and in the writings of St. Paul: that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female? (Galatians 3:28)

Closer to home, it was not so long ago that pastors who had suffered the pain and grief of a divorce were told they were no longer worthy to continue serving as pastors and were asked to leave the roster of this church. In recent years, however, the church has acknowledged that divorce is a painful reminder of the fallenness of all humanity, and one from which its pastors are not immune. Divorced pastors and rostered leaders are required to consult with their bishop and seek counseling about their future lives and ministry, but they are not automatically stricken from our rosters. Was it an unfaithful reading of Scripture, a denial of biblical authority, to accept these leaders to serve again? Or was the faithful, biblical principle upheld, that while marriage is held in highest regard, the reality of sin reminds us that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and that - thanks be to God - we are forgiven and redeemed through our Lord Jesus Christ?

And finally, I am old enough to remember a church that took literally biblical texts stating that women should keep silent in churches, should not teach, and did not allow women to become ordained. I am old enough to remember a church where women could not even serve on church councils and where young girls were not even allowed to serve as acolytes. Was it an unfaithful reading of Scripture, a denial of biblical authority, to begin allowing women to serve their God in any of these roles? Or was the faithful, biblical principle recovered that recognizes that God calls all, even women and girls, to certain Christian vocations - and some, God even gifts and calls to specific types of leadership and ministry, even ordained ministry?

Were any of these decisions unfaithful to the authority of Scripture? I claim no absolute certainty, but I do not believe that they were. And perhaps we can learn something from the way in which those who have gone before us wrestled with issues such as these.

In the past, I have taught a lay school course I entitled, at least in my head if not on the syllabus, “The Top Ten Moments that Changed Church History.” And the first of those moments, and perhaps the model of such decision-making at its best, is found in the pages of the New Testament itself, in the Book of Acts.

After the Resurrection, Jesus’s disciples and followers rushed to spread the good news of the Gospel. But even as these first missionary journeys were undertaken, the first priority of the Jewish disciples of Jesus was to their own family, the Jews, rather than to those outside of their family, the Gentiles. They insisted that any Gentile male who might wish to become a Christian would have to commit to following Jewish law – that he would first have to become a Jew, in other words, before he could become a Christian. And to become a Jew, such Gentile males had to adopt what was clearly the sign of admittance to the Jewish covenant – circumcision. The plain sense of Scripture, the clear teachings of Old Testament law, had taught that for centuries.

But then - in that first moment that changed church history - Peter had a dream: a dream which told him that all the things he had ever considered “unclean” could be made clean by God. Peter was directed to go to an unclean Gentile named Cornelius, and when

he went, he discovered that God's spirit has already been at work in the heart of the Gentile Cornelius and his household – without Cornelius or any member of his household having ever been circumcised. A stunned Peter – and his community – was forced to confront the reality that perhaps God was doing something new that they had never expected. As Dr. Peterson points out, in the very first Church Council meeting of the nascent church, the church leaders did something very like what has happened in our own day. They prayed, they read the Scriptures, they “listened to what God had been doing” in the church outside of Jerusalem from Peter, Paul and Barnabus, and they finally concluded – somewhat dumbfounded - that the Holy Spirit was telling them something: that circumcision was no longer required. People could become Christian, without becoming Jewish first.⁵

We forget how enormous this decision was, but without it, none of us would be here today. We are the descendents of those Gentiles. We are the beneficiaries of that early decision of the church leaders to recognize that God might be leading the church in a new direction. What we have here in the Book of Acts is, I think, a model for discerning the direction of the church: we can see in the pages of the Bible a place where “newer Scripture” is interpreting – and changing - “older Scripture,” right before our very eyes.

None of this was easy – and that's an understatement. This decision in the Book of Acts, to release old scriptural understandings in favor of new ones, was not made without difficulty, nor did all accept it. In almost every age, new understandings have been accompanied by a good deal of kicking, screaming, and painful self-examination. In each of these generations, good Christian people of faith disagreed, prayed, fought, and sometimes even died. And in many of these times, the people caught in the midst of them must have thought the church, as they knew it, was about to fall. To be honest, sometimes I take a kind of warped, twisted comfort in that. Both in the recognition that perhaps my age is not the only one where paradigm shifts are not made easily, and reassurance that in the end, the Spirit prevailed.

Perhaps - and I claim absolutely no certainty here - just perhaps, something similar may be happening in our own time. In the last few years, we have learned more about sexual identity than we have ever known before. This is not the time or the place to try and plumb the mystery of sexual orientation. But if, in fact, we accept the large weight of contemporary scientific evidence and the experience of our homosexual brothers and sisters - that our sexual orientation is born, not made, innate, not chosen – then what is the faithful, biblical principle we are called to uphold in order to honor a faithful reading of Scripture, an upholding of biblical authority? How does this knowledge affect what we as the church say about this?

St. Paul and even Jesus hinted that celibacy might be the better path for all of us in order to remain unencumbered to do the work of the Kingdom, but Paul recognized that celibacy is a rare gift and not a gift given to all. Does the church not, as Dr. Peterson points out, find in Scripture a faithful, biblical principle that favors lifelong, monogamous

⁵ Peterson, *The Bible, The Church*, 5.

relationships over either celibacy or promiscuity?⁶ I do not claim to have all the answers on these thorny issues, but I at least raise these as questions for us all to ponder together.

On at least one additional area of concern, it seems to me that it might be worth considering an examination of this issue from a slightly different perspective. Perhaps we should consider the possibility that the church, rather than capitulating or surrendering to the culture on this matter, might actually be attempting to **lead** the culture here. Think about it: in our culture, sexual promiscuity and exploitation of every type – heterosexual and homosexual – is celebrated on practically every television show, supermarket tabloid cover, and movie screen. It seems to bombard us everywhere we turn. For the last several years before my sons' graduation from high school, in fact, we simply did not watch television anymore – the constant bombardment of cheap, demeaning, sexual exploitation was something I did not want and did not allow in my home.

By contrast, what the church is attempting to do here could be seen, I think, as truly **counter cultural**. It is flatly rejecting this culture of promiscuity. Commanded for all, including its leaders, is chastity in singleness, faithfulness in lifelong, committed, monogamous relationships - whether for heterosexual or homosexual alike. For homosexuals, in a way it has never done so before, the church is now lifting up the ideal of publicly accountable, caring, loving, nurturing, life-giving relationships – what we all want, really. And what, I cannot help but believe, God wants for us all as well.

So where do we go from here? How do we carry on the mission of the church here in the South Carolina Synod when we are in such disagreement? Once again, I cannot claim to have the answers. I think for one thing, though, we keep praying together. Worshipping together. If my study of church history has taught me nothing else, it has taught me that when people stop praying and worshipping together, the mission of the church suffers. And that can lead to catastrophic results.

I'll share one final story from the history of the church that illustrates this danger well.

It is almost forgotten today, but in the early nineteenth century, our own South Carolina Synod suffered a devastating division. Without going into enormous detail, the issue was on the one hand, theological: should southern Lutherans attend evangelical revivals with their Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian neighbors? But like most controversies, it was also about something more than theology. It was also deeply and bitterly personal – the protagonists on either side seemed to glory in coming up with the most insulting and hateful things that could be said about each other. It was also political – should a national church, headquartered all the way up in Pennsylvania, tell individual synods or congregations what to do, or should individual synods and congregations have the right to make their own decisions? It was economic – who would get to publish the church's official worship books and catechisms? It was legal - in the ensuing controversy, who got to keep the church buildings and the property?

Rather than praying together, studying together and discerning together, people on both sides of the conflict railed at each other - and completely tore the southern Lutheran

⁶ Peterson, *Faithful Discernment*, 5.

church in this synod apart. Congregation after congregation withdrew to form a new synod, a synod they called, for complicated reasons, the “Synod of Tennessee”. Congregations and families split down the middle over the issue. Law suits were filed. Pastors and congregations were ruined. In a large congregation not more than a dozen miles from where we sit today, the members of the congregation called **two** pastors, one from the South Carolina Synod, and one from Tennessee. If you were of a Tennessee persuasion, you attended worship in the congregation on the first and third Sunday of the month. If you were of a South Carolina Synod state of mind, you attended on the second and fourth.

Who was “right” in the controversy? Both sides had good people who read their Bibles, who read their Lutheran Confessions, and who came to very different understandings of what the church was all about. The disaster, however, was that instead of talking and praying with each other, they insulted, offended and belittled each other. They could not – they refused to - resolve their issues. And they split the church in two.

To read the story of the Tennessee Synod controversy now, all these years later, it is to feel at once both incredulous and enormously sad. The overwhelming emotion that I experience when studying these events is one of tragedy – what a waste . . . What a loss of energy that could have been placed in service to the mission of the church . . . Each synod had its own synod conventions, its own theological training, its own college, its own publishing ventures.

It took over one hundred years for the two synods to come back together. They did not reunify until 1922, within the lifetime of some of you present today. And it resolved itself in the way – sadly - a lot of these controversies do. The original protagonists died, pastors and lay people eventually started talking to their neighbors again, and congregations started working together, slowly but surely, to address the mission of the church. By the 1880’s, a son of one of the original – and most cantankerous - founders of the Tennessee Synod met to work on a joint committee with some members of the South Carolina Synod. After working and listening to his South Carolina brethren over the course of several days, he issued what was, for him, the ultimate compliment: “You are,” he said, “better Lutherans than I thought you were.”⁷

To think of how much stronger the Lutheran church could be today in the Southeast had this split not occurred is, of course, to wonder about the impossible - but wonder I do. How much more could this church have done in that century-long period, if only that truth had been acknowledged earlier? How many more churches would have been planted? How much more deeply would we have spent that time studying the Scriptures? How many more of the hungry could have been fed? How much stronger would our institutions be?

If nothing else comes out of this Day of Holy Conversation than this, it is my hope that we can at least turn to those beside and behind us in the pews, brothers and

⁷ Socrates Henkel to John Cappelmann, as recorded in Samuel T. Hallman, ed. *History of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of South Carolina, 1824 - 1924* (Columbia, SC: Farrell Printing Company, Inc., 1924), 272.

sisters in Christ with whom we disagree, and say, “you are better Lutherans than I thought you were.” But I hope for more than that too. I agree completely with my colleague Dr. Yeago that we are suffering from a malaise of spirit in many of our churches. But look at all of us gathered here today. On a Saturday. What **would** it look like to come and talk on a Saturday about Jesus, as Dr. Yeago suggests? What would that inspire us to do together in the name of Christ?

Christians will forever read their Scriptures and disagree on its interpretation – that is inevitable. Luther found that out in the sixteenth century. We are living that out in the twenty-first. But when dedicated, faithful students of the Scriptures are dismissed as heretics, when any reading of Scripture that conflicts with one’s own gets condemned as faithless and godless, then I grieve - we have lost what it means to be the church.

I am getting to the point in my life where I ask myself: what will my grandchildren say about the church I am bequeathing to them? And I find myself uncomfortable with resolutions that ask us to, in effect, build a wall around our synod and say: we will accept these candidates, pastors, or rostered leaders, but not those. After all, it is not so long ago that our ancestors might have erected such a wall to keep women from serving as our pastors. Or African Americans. Or even Yankees . . . I am much more willing to trust that congregations can make their own decisions about whom they wish to call and whom they don’t.

I am even more uneasy about resolutions that call for us to withhold our funds from the work of the church. It is easy to say that we will withhold funds only from the ELCA or the synod office and instead send them to places that really need it and deserve it. But I worry greatly that while some agencies and institutions may continue to find support, others will not - those that perhaps aren’t as visible or simply don’t have as vocal a constituency. We have an amazing church that does amazing ministry in places most of us don’t even know about. We employ people all over the world and right here at home to do the work of Christ in our name. That work will suffer. It already is suffering. And that is one of the **real** tragedies of this situation for me.

In my life in the church, I have been taught and prayed over and mentored by many, many heterosexual pastors. Persons who had undeniable gifts for ministry, who loved the Lord and loved the gospel. Persons who – like me - have also been flawed and fallible and who have made mistakes. Saint and sinner.

And I have also been taught and prayed over and mentored by homosexual pastors. Persons who had undeniable gifts for ministry, who loved the Lord and loved the gospel. Persons who have also been flawed and fallible and who have made mistakes. Saint and sinner. In most cases, I did not find out they were gay until years later – the cost for them to keep their secrets must have been excruciating. How much more could they have lived out the Gospel had these resolutions been in place during their lifetimes?

What I want in my pastor is someone who is called to that role by God, who has been given gifts for ministry by God, who can preach to me the words of the Gospel in ways

that will pierce my stony heart, who can provide pastoral care to me in times of grief, who can administer the sacraments to strengthen me on this long, winding journey we call life, and who – if they so choose – live a life of faithfulness and fidelity to one person. I'm a pretty demanding person. In reality, there probably aren't many gay pastors like that. Truth be told, there probably aren't many **straight** pastors like that either, although I am blessed in my life to have just such pastors now.

Dr. H. George Anderson, one of my professors at Southern Seminary and a former Presiding Bishop of this church, long ago maintained that church historians should never try to predict the future. But if the difficulty of being a church historian is that one is always, it seems studying controversy, the joy of being a church historian is seeing the clear hand of God at work, despite all of that controversy. That simple realization means, among other things, that I do not have to have all wisdom and truth – none of us do. All we can do is walk tentatively, humbly, and uncertainly along a path that seems now only dimly lit. I am uncertain of the next steps, but I am confident in my Lord. It is not my church. It is not even our church. It is God's church. And I take enormous comfort in that.

Thinking through this matter has been a journey for me, starting as a young person growing up in my home congregation and wrestling with deeply devoted Christians who were homosexual. It has continued through my study of the Scriptures and my study of the history of the church. It will continue through conversations today and in the days to come.

If you had told me five years ago that I would be having a discussion using the words "gay" and "sex" and "homosexual" in a conversation with my elderly parents, I would have never believed you – much less if you'd told me I'd be having this conversation in front of a thousand people at Newberry College. But that day last August around the Sunday dinner table turned into a holy conversation - and it is my hope that this day can continue to be one as well. May God be with us all.