

Kairos CoMotion Panel

February 23, 2002

After two days of Bishop John Shelby Spong moving us from a 1st century world view to that of the 21st century, Bishop Judith Craig helping us through that transition with an image of "living stones," helpful and practical workshops, and networking between people, Kairos CoMotion brought together a panel to challenge the participants to continue living into today by addressing specific issues.

Bishop Craig moderated the panel and began by recognizing the need for "hope and courage" in response to having been stirred up by the first part of Kairos CoMotion. She called the panel participants to testify to their experience of God.

Rev. Larry Pickens

Rev. Larry Pickens, pastor of First United Methodist Church, Elgin, Illinois and member of the Judicial Council, began the panel with reflections upon racism. Pickens said it was important to address issues of white superiority, white privilege, and the potentially demonic nature of many of our structures.

Pickens began by talking about our society where patterns and assumptions affect the way our church structures function. If you don't believe that, he said, consider that the reason we talk about inclusivity today is because there is a need for us to open up our spectrums as we enter into relationships with other people. For example there must be other people of color who are progressive and bring something to the agenda. What role could we play to assure that perspective of those who are different from ourselves are heard and experienced? In the process of promoting inclusivity we must also be willing to share the planning, the designing, and the actual work that we do together.

When Pickens is asked about personal experiences of racism he notes both personal and ecclesiastical relationships.

"When we lose track of the contributions of others and the opportunity of sharing from different perspectives," said Pickens, "it somehow takes away from the experience we can share together as we talk about experiencing kairos. When we find ourselves in structures and circumstances that often times debilitate persons we

must examine those structures and find ways in which we ourselves may serve to dismantle those structures of prejudice and racism."

Pickens noted that in recent days the Israeli government declared that Yassir Arafat was irrelevant. He said, "This is a powerful thing - to determine whether someone is relevant or irrelevant." This shows up where some whites support some African American leadership on the basis of who the white community will approve. They do this without "partnering" with the minority community and this results in leadership being imposed by a patriarchal structure.

"What the majority community fails to realize," said Pickens, "is that in these patterns there is created a reward and punishment system which creates an environment in which petty politics further divides people of color.

Pickens closed with a personal story about his call to become a lawyer as well as a preacher. The cabinet told him they opposed his decision to attend law school and that he did not have the support of the African American clergy.

His response was that they did not have the authority to determine his support. He went to law school and found the church hierarchy made hellish his first year there.

Six years later, to show how good God is, he was glad he did not give up his autonomy and added a law degree to his theological education when he was asked by Gregory Dell to serve as his church counsel at a church trial for performing a same-sex union.

"The truth of the experience," said Pickens, "is clear to me. Had I not been there at that particular time in history, capable to defend Greg, it would have made a major difference in what transpired in 1999. Actually, had I not gone to law school I would have been a member of the committee on investigation, charged with the responsibility to determine whether or not there was enough evidence to go to a church trial. Had I not gone to law school I would have been on the wrong side of history."

Pickens closed by saying, "When we are exclusive we have a negative impact upon the future of our church."

Craig had the Kairos CoMotion participants to look at how white they were and to turn to one another in small groups to reflect on what Pickens said by considering two questions: Can you name the "pinch" Larry just put on you? and Can you think of one specific action you can take in the next month that would respond to that "pinch"?

Jack Murtaugh

Jack Murtaugh, retired Executive Director of the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee, rose to speak about how the church has wounded and excluded the economically depressed.

What do we pay church staff? What are our hiring practices? Do we hire non-union contractors because they will do the work cheaper? are quick measuring rods of church complicity in issues of poverty.

In addition to the inside issues is the reality that "the congregation is the local expression of Christianity," Murtaugh said it was "at times focused more upon the individual good than the common good."

If congregations are not growing while the population around them is, consultants are brought in to see what programs were needed to meet the individual needs of that surrounding population. Very little is done about raising the consciousness of that congregation about the common good.

By the "common good," Murtaugh means, "the ability to participate fully in the life of our society and to have one's needs met economically, to have health care, to have jobs, to have education, all that is necessary to truly live out the human life."

We have set up subtle and overt economic barriers to prevent people from being part of our community. This led Murtaugh to ask, "What has taken place in the formation programs of our congregations to help people see the common good? People do participate in compassionate and charitable action in food pantries and the like, but are there any programs in our congregations that is helping the people to reflect on their experience so that they grow from it? Are they asking why? Why are there people standing in line at food pantries and meal programs?"

In a way we are saying that in works of charity "I feel good about what I am doing," but in working for justice I am working to see that "the other person feels good about themselves and their dignity."

Murtaugh asks, "What percentage of my time and resources is devoted to assisting the congregation, the broader church, to work for the common good, to raise the awareness that we are connected, and that we are called to deal with justice?"

Murtaugh concluded by quoting Ralph Reed, former director of the Christian Coalition, who wrote to Enron saying that for \$380,000 he proposed a lobbying process using campaign contributions, talk show hosts, and non-profit organizations to achieve favorable legislation. Reed was quoted as writing, "In public policy it matters less who has the best arguments and more by who gets heard and by whom."

The economically disadvantaged and those struggling for drug-free neighborhoods or affordable housing and more are asking us to see them as brothers and sisters and to be in solidarity with them and to use our resources in our communities to call for justice, to work for the common good. We need to continue to not only have this "best" argument from God's perspective but to see that is it heard where it counts.

Craig again had the Kairos CoMotion participants turn to one another. The question they were asked to address was: Considering the congregation in which you participate, name the evidence that you see that you are focused inward. Then ask what you can do or say to dramatize this importance of the common good.

Susan Laurie

Susan Laurie is a "self-identified United Methodist believer in Jesus" rose to speak about homosexuality in the United Methodist Church. She said, "Sometimes that's called an issue and I'd like you to think of it as people."

"The reality for United Methodists who are gay and lesbian who are open," said Laurie, "is that we don't have congregations we participate in."

Laurie recognized that while there are some reconciling congregations in certain geographic locations, where she and her partner Julie live there are not any congregations in which to participate. They have heard the "welcoming" word but since coming to Western Pennsylvania after graduating from seminary they have been "kicked out of four churches in three years."

She knows that the people using the welcoming word are sincere and earnest in saying it but gay and lesbian people don't believe that because of their experience when they attend a church as openly happy homosexuals. Laurie said she and Julie have enjoyed being together almost 20 years and enjoy being United Methodist because they met in a United Methodist Church in Bible study and love much in the United Methodist Church with its open communion and theology even though she as been asked in subtle ways and by Administrative Councils writing resolutions to keep gay people from participating in any leadership positions, has been arrested, and, when hired by a church, had her position argued about at Annual Conference.

One of the ways Laurie remembers who she is as a Christian and as a gay person, and happy to be that way, was starting a group for gay Christians at home called BYKOTA. Lauries said it sounds kind of Greek and churchy, but mostly it stands for Ephesians 4:32, "Be ye kind, one to another." This is what the group yearns for from the church and wants to be and offer to others.

Laurie says, "We do not see ourselves as victims, except that people victimize us and beat on us and kick us out of churches, but we are resilient and confident in the love God has for us." Laurie finds that people wish she was a victim and would quit showing up.

This diversity of God's creation known as homosexuality is not so easily segregated out. "Every one of us is in a congregation with gay and lesbian people and if you don't know who they are," said Laurie, "then you haven't been church to them yet. You need to find ways to help them be safe enough that you know who they are. You need to come out first."

"One of the ways you can come out first is to use the book of the church, which is not the Book of Discipline but the Gospel of Jesus Christ," said Laurie. "I read the Bible and I get my hope from the Bible."

The Gospel of Matthew - You are the light of the world, this is your life, don't hide under a bushel basket, let your light shine. "That was written to me and it was written to all of you also. Fortunately I had a growing up in the church that got that into my heart even before I knew I was lesbian," said Laurie.

Paul - Wherever that thing comes from that says "Love the sinner, hate the sin," Paul says love is patient and kind, slow to anger, does not insist on its own way. Paul says we can't be the church unless everyone's there. Paul said, and General Conference 2000 theme said, we who are many are one body.

Laurie expressed thanks to the BYKOTA group for "helping her remember who she is as a called person in the church." She continued, "I have helped them, too, read the Bible as self-aware, confident Christians; that it is written to us. When Paul says no one can be cut out of the body of Christ, that the people of less honor will be given more honor, I'll say, 'That's us.'"

"It might be hard on us," said Laurie, "because we are at churches where people don't know who we are, we're invisible, but we read this not through a heterosexual filter. We read it as who we are and we claim it for ourselves" even though there are "Bible bullies" who would deny this.

Laurie noted, "There is another book in the United Methodist Church that is really important, too - the Hymnal and there aren't so many Hymnal bullies." When the hymns begin, her defenses against being wounded by Bible words and sermon words and false welcomes start to come down.

That great Advent hymn, "Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free, Israel's strength and consolation" is loved by the BYKOTA group and means much to Laurie as a gay person.

She recommends that the next time you are singing, "Here I am Lord" that you introduce it as a great gay hymn. "Gay people love this hymn," said Laurie, "Get into their experience."

A line from "God of the sparrow," - "How does the creature say home" - reminds Laurie that she has not had a church home since 1992. Her home is in the Reconciling Ministries movement. A hard part for her is when the liberals invite them to church on Easter. "The hard part," said Laurie, "is not having a church home on Easter, but every Sunday when y'all are in church and we don't have a place to go."

Craig again focused small discussions around these questions: Can your life story connect with Susan's life story? What can you do in your congregation to connect life stories?

Holly Near

Holly Near, singer, songwriter, activist, touched on several issues.

She spoke first about assumptions. While in a writing group, while talking about problems in the world, someone commented that the people in that room didn't have all those problems. Near recounted that she knew most of the people in the room and one who was a sex-worker who sold herself for money to raise her children, one who had an in-law in prison for drug deals, one who has hepatitis C, one whose spouse worked the night shift and the questioner was stunned that all that was in the room. What we don't know about one another is what makes us feel unsafe.

Near knows a Viet Nam vet who is large, walks with a limp, and looks scary at times when he is struggling. When he is in grocery stores the thing he hates most is when people yell at their children in an emotionally abusive way. He has developed a technique that when this is going on he will go over and hit a row of cans with his shoulder to knock them to the floor as a distraction, so there will some larger problem going on than the problem of the child. It is not an assumption one would make about this big, burly vet that he goes around stores taking care of children.

Near then asked, "How can we immediately come out to each other and let each other know that it's ok to be who we really are? How do we listen?"

Separatism was a second issue Near raised. She came through the 70's when there was a great deal of separatism and she says it is an essential element to challenging a dominant culture. Black people needed to separate from racism long enough to find out who they are if they are not working for The Man. "Who are we as black people if we are not who you all think we are?" Likewise in the women's community, women needed to separate from sexism. "Who am I if I am not the woman you think I am?" The same thing happened in the gay and lesbian community and in the deaf community.

"Separatism is really important," said Near, "It gives us breathing room to find out who we are so we can bring ourselves back to society the way we are, not the way you think we are."

This process is still happening. Someone may be 70 years old when they finally recognize, "O, this is who I am." At that moment, when you find out you are have been someone other than who you really are, the chance are you are mad. When we are in meetings and you see someone is angry because of this, the tendency of the group is to not want that person to be angry. Near says, we should invite and cherish that anger. She asked why she would not want Pickens to be angry at racism for it

can help wash things clean. We live in a racist culture and the anger can help us undo that.

The third issue Near raised was "we/they" relationships. "While it is too bad that the people we are serving are not here to speak for themselves," said Near, "it is ok when a group of middle-class white people gather to do good things because outreach can be really racist, homophobic." Outreach means we are going to bring "those" people to "our" space. We are going to bring them to where we feel comfortable and we still hold the control of the room.

The real challenge is not to bring other people here but to go where they are. Can you go and leaflet for an event that isn't your issue? clean the dishes? sweep up the floor? be the silent support somewhere else? Near challenged her hearers to be the minority in their room rather than asking them to be the minority in yours.

Relating a story of being in Japan with Bernice Johnson Reagon of *Sweet Honey in the Rock*, Near set the scene of the two of them sitting on the floor facing one another to rehearse a song. Bernice stopped them saying, "We're singing together. That means your voice can't come any further than half-way. You have to stop my voice in the middle of the space between the two of us. Right there is where we sing. Otherwise you might as well be singing alone." Near said she has never forgotten that moment and we all need to bring something to the table. She concluded with the challenge to find out who you are - and bring it to the table.

"So, who are you? and You've been here, so what? Turn and talk to one another." With these words Craig continued to help make the presentations more than presentations.

Following conversation there came comments and questions from the floor.