

'Progressive Christians' meet in Wisconsin

By Wesley White

Special to the Reporter

MIDDLETON, Wis.-Some 300 "progressive Christians," many of them United Methodists, joined together recently to search for what their keynote speaker called "a new Christianity."

The conference, called Kairos CoMotion, offered theological discourse as well as practical instruction on sparking change in religious institutions to create a more "fully human" church that respects and celebrates individual diversity.

Kairos CoMotion began in October 2000 when the Revs. Lynn Church and Amy DeLong of Wisconsin looked for a positive way to counter what they experienced as a growing exclusiveness within The United Methodist Church.

"We are here because we want to talk about new ways of being together, new ways of being the church," Ms. DeLong said in an opening statement.

"We are here because we are tired of feeling bad about how bad it is in the church for some of our brothers and sisters and we want to participate in the solutions. We are here because there is a disconnection between what the church says and how it treats God's people and we want to close the gap. We are here because we believe 'all are welcome' means all are welcome."

The gathering's keynote speaker was one of the most prominent change agents of American religion: retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong.

Bishop Spong delivered the keynote address, "God Beyond Theism." He framed his remarks with two statements: "I am a Christian" and "I live in the 21st century."

Noting that "the experience of God" is different from "the explanation of that experience," Bishop Spong detailed how the "God-is-in-Christ!" experience has been differently understood from the perspectives of resurrection (Paul), Jesus' baptism (Mark), Jesus' birth (Matthew and Luke), or the beginning of creation (John).

The bishop cited how human thinking changed after the discoveries of such scientists as Newton, Darwin, Freud and Einstein. Likewise, he said, a 21st century person has the same God experiences as the first century person but explains those experiences in radically different ways.

Bishop Spong encouraged his listeners to bring their 21st century expressions of God into their churches. "You are not letting God go, you are letting ancient explanations of God go."

Another featured speaker, retired United Methodist Bishop Judith Craig, said that Christians should be "living stones"-that is, believers who embrace and live in the tension between the "new thing" that God is doing and past orthodoxies which the church reveres in its tradition. Bishop Craig said that the struggle to cut free from limitations of historic understandings leaves her feeling "a little bit alienated in my land of 'church.'"

"We walk a fine line, for we are saying of the tradition and orthodoxy that it is the heresy, while the adherents of orthodoxy are saying the search and searchers are heretical," Bishop Craig said. "What is heresy but a challenge to tradition, an invitation to fresh thinking, an availing of the best intellectual means of discernment available?"

"I think it is harder to be a living stone looking for the new thing God is revealing than it is to be in solid, sure pathways that don't require searching through the unfamiliar."

"Searching through the unfamiliar" at Kairos CoMotion included workshops on such topics as how to overcome racism, economic injustice and institutional inertia and how to initiate and lead change.

During closing worship, Wisconsin Area Bishop Sharon Zimmerman Rader expressed gratitude for the event, which she said invited its participants to "pay attention."

Bishop Rader likened the progressive Christian movement to the story of Queen Esther who knew the dangers of trying to influence the king.

"We've been warned not to make people uncomfortable about how they spend their money or waste their time," she said.

"We've been warned not to challenge our government for its unjust economy or its military policies. We've been warned not to talk openly about sexuality. We've been warned not to say that the Book of Discipline is sometimes incompatible with Christian teaching. We've been warned not to tell that we are gay or lesbian."

"We are being challenged to use this opportunity for good, to be stewards of the moment given to us, to take risks big and small, in order to be faithful to our God and to each other. As Christians we take up the Jesus walk. We live with people Jesus lives with. We challenge the systems Jesus challenges. We focus on the God in which Jesus found purpose and meaning."

Mr. White is a member of the board of Kairos CoMotion.

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March 18, 2002