

Singing the Lord's Song in the 21st Century

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Progressive Christianity is worth celebrating. This was the clear message of Kairos CoMotion, a gathering of progressive Christians in Madison, Wisconsin in February. Organized and attended primarily by United Methodists, persons from other denominations participated as well. The presentations were provocative and discussion was lively

Keynote speaker, Bishop Shelby Spong, affirmed our connection with the realities of contemporary life and spoke clearly about being both a Christian and a citizen of the 21st century.

Spong stressed the distinction between "a God experience" and "an explanation of that experience." Once we appreciate that difference, the power of the static, fundamentalist, literalist, creedal approach diminishes and we can recognize a dynamic, living God actually doing a new thing with a new heaven and a new earth. And so, "The task of the Church," says Spong, "is to learn how to sing the Lord's song in the foreign land of the 21st century."

Speaker Bishop Judith Craig continued this thought by reflecting on the tension in the phrase, "living stones." The stones of tradition are important inasmuch as they reveal that our ancestors had a powerful God experience that they passed on through the language and worldview of their time. Our task is to carry on the experience without getting stuck in the explanation. "It is more demanding," according to Craig, "to create a movement than to live in an institution.... But for me that is the call of Jesus, a journey that makes sense in my time and place, building on the teachings that have brought me thus far, but not resting on them as if they are all I need."

Through additional elements of worship, workshops and a panel, participants in Kairos CoMotion were called to be proactive on issues of race, sexuality, economic justice, ecumenism, scriptural interpretation, and more.

Bishop Sharon Rader brought together many of these issues in the closing worship. "The status of the faithful Christian," said Rader, quoting Dennis Jacobson, "is always one of being an alien in a strange land. Always feeling unease with the disease of the culture. To come out of Babylon is to live in a constant state of resistance to the -isms. To come out of Babylon is to connect with a community of faith and faithfulness. To come out of Babylon is to act in accordance with one's conscience. To come out of Babylon is to be confronted with one's own power of possibility."

This is important to the Methodist Federation for Social Action, and to progressive Christians in general, as we are besieged by admonishments from the cultural and

religious right. In Rader's words, "We've been warned. We've been warned not to tell anyone. And we've obeyed. We've been warned not to make people uncomfortable about how they spend their money or waste their time. 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've been warned."

With Kairos CoMotion and many other grassroots events around the world, we sense the Spirit of God energizing that part of the Christian experience known by different names at different times in our history - Prophetic, Wesleyan Social Holiness, MFSA, Social Gospel, and now Progressive - that always looks for ways to build God's community through care for the real and metaphoric hungry, thirsty, homeless, shivering, sick, and imprisoned, those currently excluded from the awareness of the Church.

Bishop Rader put it this way, "The purpose of this event is to build community so we can do what we believe needs to be done. We need to join together and we need to invite others to join with us in an effort toward greater justice, hope, reconciliation. And we will live in the tension, the tension that is always present in our midst, between conscience and compromise, between faithfulness and effectiveness, between morality and expediency, between prophetic and practical, between the world as it should be and the world as it is. We came in the tension, we go out in the tension. The tension is our home."

An opportunity to further engage the experience of Kairos CoMotion and be encouraged to live as a Christian in the context of the 21st century is available at www.KairosCoMotion.org.

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