

# The Stewardship of Story: More Light

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**Betty Iwan, Ralph Carter, John Wilkinson**  
**Third Presbyterian Church**  
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JOHN WILKINSON: The More Light journey of this congregation, working for the inclusion of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queer persons in the life of the church and culture, seemed an important story to tell as we mark the 190<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this congregation and experience a Year of Stewardship. Please note the extensive timeline that we have printed in the bulletin, to acknowledge how many have done so much for so long.

It seemed fitting to ask two of our long-standing and highly inspiring leaders, Betty Iwan and Ralph Carter, to share their perspectives. I am grateful to Betty and Ralph for so many things, including their willingness to share this morning.

BETTY IWAN: Since Third Church has been a frontrunner in social justice, it is no wonder that it was a leader in approving ordination for GLBT persons in the Presbyterian Church. When I joined Third Church in 1976, little did I know that I would be speaking, writing letters and marching for equality toward that aim during the next 42 years.

Three years after joining, I learned that the Presbyterian denomination refused to ordain GLBT persons as ministers, elders and deacons. I was dumb-founded since I was sure that the Presbyterians in general and Third Church in particular ordained all persons who felt called and were qualified. I had to decide whether to find another denomination or stay and work for change. I am still here.

In the mid 80's, Ralph and I were asked to serve on a task force to explore Third Church's response to a *Book of Order* section that prohibited "*unrepentant homosexuals*" from serving as ordained officers. We were angry that our denomination had this policy. We knew we had work to do to convince others

that it was wrong. The wording was changed in 1997 but it was equally as discriminatory. It just did not use the word, *homosexual*.

Originally, our task force was charged with maintaining a weekly support group for GLBT persons; recommending that Session approve a statement that says we consider all members for ordained office who are called and qualified; and replacing the inequitable *Book of Order* language. We met weekly to study the Bible and consult with others. We arranged annual workshops for church officers and adult education for our congregation. In those early days, we focused on what the *Bible* said and did not say about same gender relationships. The rationale for discriminatory *Book of Order* policy was based on how the supporters interpreted the “clobber texts” in the Bible. We thought we needed to fight back with alternative *Biblical* understandings.

We were *not* optimistic that policy shifts would happen fast. I remember listening to a national speaker who was in his mid 30’s saying that he did not expect the church to change in his lifetime. It was discouraging to hear that prediction. Peoples’ minds were entrenched with decades of prejudices against people who were sexually attracted to others of the same sex.

Shortly after the our Session approved a statement of inclusion, I participated in a gathering of clergy and elders from Third Church and Brighton Presbyterian Church. Brighton and three other churches charged us with holding a position on ordaining persons that was against the *Book of Order*. This gathering was an attempt to talk Brighton out of filing an ecclesiastical court case against us. My stomach was churning in disgust with all the harsh remarks made about “those homosexuals.” We were not successful in changing minds, and were subsequently faced with an ugly remedial case.

Our Task Force morphed into a Committee of Session. Changing the denominational ordination policy was next. We looked more seriously at what the *Bible* said about justice, equality and love. We knew that God loves all God’s people and that the *Bible* had lots to say about loving relationships. We also concluded that if you know people who are gay, then you are more likely to seek equal justice for them. Ralph, Jim Stewart and I gave talks and answered

questions about the “church and homosexuality” at churches around upstate New York. Elder Jim Fisher, who moved to Greensboro, NC, during this period, also spoke to his Presbytery about the injustices.

Meanwhile, our committee advocated for change in local and federal laws. Third Church was one of the first churches to march in the Rochester Gay Pride Parade. Marching was both exhilarating and disheartening. Crowds cheered as we walked by with our banner. But we were blasted by some who shouted through bull horns, “Homosexuality is sinful. You will go to hell if you do not repent.”

In 2008, I spoke to a committee of General Assembly in San Jose, CA in defense of an amendment to the *Book of Order* brought by the Presbytery of Genesee Valley that would replace the discriminatory wording. We were crestfallen that the overture failed again as it had several times in the past. A similar overture was approved in 2010 and, after a majority of the presbyteries also approved it, the door was finally open for ordination for all.

RALPH CARTER: Ideas help us navigate Life. Remember the book: “All I Really Need to Know, I learned in Kindergarten?” Share everything, say you’re sorry when you hurt someone, take naps every afternoon. When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.

Then the adorable and durable songs we learn in Sunday School that feed our Spirit:

“Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so.”

“This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine.”

While I became a teenager: Kennedy then King were assassinated, the Voting and Civil Rights Acts passed, the Vietnam War raged. We landed on the moon, Woodstock happened, Equal Rights Amendment for women began. Judy Garland passed away, and the riots against police raids happened at the gay bar Stonewall in New York City.

A tumultuous time yet filled with great promise for the future. This young gay man knew God’s love was unconditional, though the world might vilify and

condemn. My burning questions entering adulthood after moving to Rochester: “Is it possible to live authentically, without secrets, without hiding? Is there a spiritual community who will fully embrace people like me, providing sanctuary when we are spiritually hurt or wounded?”

This morning I want to share three key perspectives that I believe sustained us on this difficult journey together which continues even now as we look to the future.

*Perspective 1. Love and cherish your community.* I moved here because I admired its culture and music. I came to love Rochester for its historic leadership for social justice for women, African Americans and eventually for the queer community. I joined Third Church because I appreciate education, its music, sermons and strong mission. I cherish learning we hosted the formation of the Anti-Slavery Society of Rochester in 1833, originated the national efforts to ordain female clergy in 1955 and became the largest congregation in the country to eventually declare its commitment to More Light in 1987. These stories sustained us during the seven years of considering More Light.

*Perspective 2. There is strength in vulnerability.* Did you know there are over 31,000 verses in the Bible? Of which there are seven texts which purport to condemn same-gender loving people. We call them “Clobber texts.” And we would hear them endlessly. When someone hits you, you want to hit back.

Remember Jesus’ parable: if someone backhands you on your right cheek, like a subordinate, turn and offer your left cheek, so to hit you again, they have to use a fist, no longer treating you as a subordinate. Similarly, share your story with honesty and humility, inviting your neighbor to reciprocate. It invites Holy Spirit into the conversation which changes everything.

*Perspective 3. Look for wisdom in the margins.* The only way to make a circle from a tapestry is to gather and weave the margins together, one by one. After seven years of consideration, there was a final six-part Adult Education series, before the Session considered early 1987 whether to adopt a More Light statement. Discussions were spirited yet thoughtful. At one gathering, Betsy Hudnut rose to speak. Her late husband Bill had been the beloved pastor of Third Church for

nearly 20 years. Betsy was normally a quiet person, and rarely spoke in public. Mrs. Hudnut noted that although a number had strongly encouraged us to take a stand for justice, there was some ambivalence about taking such a leap. Would we lose members or standing by taking such a bold step? Betsy said: “We speak fondly how Lilian Alexander authored the original overture that paved the way for women’s ordination to ministry. How Session approved that overture in 1953, and won at Rochester Presbytery, then failed at General Assembly. Only to return two years later, with successful adoption in 1955.

We are proud of our efforts then. But, I remember the fear of uncertainty. This moment reminds me of 1953. The pressing matter then was women in leadership. The matter before us now has remarkable parallels. There are few congregations in this country who have the ability to lead in matters such as this. Third Church has that ability to provide leadership, if she so decides.”

Then she sat down, after which, the room was silent, as we pondered the remarkable, prescient words of one of our elders.

JOHN WILKINSON: In retrospect, my own mind really didn’t need much changing – it made sense to me readily that “homosexuality,” as the language used to be, wasn’t inherently a sin, and that persons of the same gender could live in loving and faithful relationships. Once I understood that, the rest was pretty straightforward. My time and energy have been spent on two fronts, inviting the church into that same perspective, and seeking to hold in relationship those Presbyterians who couldn’t come to that understanding.

In 1996, when the General Assembly codified more formally and restrictively what had been policy and practice, and then reaffirmed that the next year, something called the Covenant Network of Presbyterians was born, to work on constitutional change in the church, and, frankly, to work on the “straight” middle part of the church, while More Light Presbyterians and, later, That All May Freely Serve, continued their important ministries. Still in Chicago, I was privileged to be part of that initial Covenant Network team, a nearly 20-year affiliation. In the earlier days, our case was made less using “justice” language, though that was always present, and more so on the church, ecclesial side. A categorical prohibition not

to even consider ordaining LGBT Presbyterians was certainly unjust. But it was also not very Presbyterian. Why?

- It privileged ordination over baptism, which is not Presbyterian, creating a group of second-class citizens within the church.
- It pre-emptively restricted the work of the Holy Spirit, which is also not Presbyterian.
- It took decision-making out of the hands of those who are most immediately given it, which is also not Presbyterian.
- It made narrow arguments about the Bible, and while fighting about the Bible is *very* Presbyterian, we are also committed to the whole Bible and the important communal practice of interpretation.
- It made even more difficult a very Presbyterian practice of living together in the face of disagreements.

What *is* very Presbyterian is to trust the Holy Spirit, take the Bible seriously and find moments in our history where we have worked through difficult conversations in community to land at a new place. That's what we sought to do.

Therefore, I was pleased later to land at Third Church where this conversation had years of ramp-up, and then to see together how we might work more urgently for change. And by looking at the timeline, you will see that it happened, the impact and results of the work, transformed ordination practices and the even quicker adoption of marriage equality. Thank God!

At a funeral reception last summer, out of town, several came to me to thank me for my work on all of this. Had Betty and Ralph, and so many others of you (like Caryl Qualich), some who have gone before you (like Jim Stewart), been there with me, I hope I would have deflected all of that. You, Third Presbyterian Church, early in the life of the church saw a wrong, and persistently, thoughtfully, lovingly and passionately righted it, even in the face of deep discouragement. I am grateful for that witness, what it has meant, what it means to who we are now, and what it suggests for us going forward.

This story matters, on its own, in a stewardship kind of way and in an anniversary year, but it also matters as a symbol of other commitments and, I hope, future commitments, where we can use the best of our theological and biblical tradition, the strength of this community and the power of our voice to make a difference.

But for now, may we be thankful that the church did indeed perceive more light, and that, even just a little bit more, all are welcome in this place. Amen.