

Our Reconciling Journey

by Bobby McMillan



St. John's United Methodist Church

Lubbock, Texas

ST. JOHN'S STATEMENT OF RECONCILIATION

We affirm that through God's redeeming love for all, we are one in Christ. We respect the inherent and valuable contributions each member makes to the Body of Christ. We celebrate our diversity and recognize the sacred worth and dignity of all persons regardless of sexual orientation, gender, race, age, ethnicity, physical or mental capacity, education, or economic or marital status.

As we journey toward reconciliation, we proclaim this statement of welcome to all who have known the pain of exclusion and discrimination within the church. We welcome all persons to full participation in the life and ministries of St. John's United Methodist Church.

At the same time, we recognize that there remain differences of opinion among us. We do not seek to erase our differences. We welcome all in our journey together in faith toward greater understanding and mutual respect.

As a Reconciling Congregation, we believe that we are being reconciled to God and to one another.

"All this is from God, who reconciled us . . . through Christ, and who gives us the ministry of reconciliation." II Corinthians 5:18.

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This journey of reconciling ministries began, for me, as I listened to stories of pain from the rejected and those who loved the outcasts. Two mothers named Lucile helped me not only listen, but to hear as they unfolded the stories about their gay sons.

Years before I was appointed to be the pastor of St. John's United Methodist Church, I met the first mother. She was a member of the church I served in another city. She invited me to her apartment one day to tell me the story of her two gay sons, both of whom had died with AIDS. She loved her sons unconditionally and longed for the church to share her love for them and others who long ago had experienced rejection.

At that time, I was on the brink of joining a journey, yet unknown to me, but nevertheless taking seed in my soul as I began listening to more and more stories of rejection such as this mother's. The stories came from many segments of life: from closeted men and women from every vocation and walk, including clergy, young teen-agers, moms, dads, brothers, sisters-- in short, people you and I know but really do not know.

As I listened, I knew--the church must change its position from exclusion to inclusion, from alienation to reconciliation.

Then, a colleague from New York, listening to my growing awareness and concern, introduced me to the Reconciling Church movement as it was called in those earlier days. At the time, she was on the Board of Directors, and she sent me

information and brochures that became seeds of unrest in the soil of my soul. Those seeds grew as only unrest can grow.

Then, in 1992, I was appointed to serve St. John's, a church to which I was attracted because of its commitment to social justice and to excellence in worship and liturgy. Soon after I began my ministry, a mother named Lucile called and invited me to her home for tea. Lucile Ford came faithfully to the 8:30 Eucharist every Sunday. When I first encountered her in the worship service, I was awed by her stately, beautiful, graceful presence. She was in her 80's at that time and carried herself with such dignity balanced by genuine hospitality.

At her home that afternoon, she had prepared a true English tea, complete with cakes, little sandwiches, and a beautifully set table. Shortly, she spoke of her children, all of whom were living in other cities, all of whom were her pride and joy. Then, with great pride and love, she told me of her son, John, who she proudly proclaimed was gay and had a partner with whom he had shared many years in a committed relationship.

At the time of this encounter with Lucile, John and his partner both were in the final stages of living and dying with AIDS.

John had served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Agriculture in the Reagan Administration, and his complete story is told by his sister, Susan Ford Wiltshire, in her book *Seasons of Grief and Grace*, copies of which are in the St. John's library.

I listened to Lucile's story and the seed of unrest took deeper root, particularly, when she looked directly into my eyes and said: "I hope the day will come when St. John's United Methodist Church, becomes a reconciling congregation." She

spoke of her full commitment and complete dedication to this hope and she made it very clear that she was, in her words, a warrior for this ministry. She remembered that my predecessor, Ted Dotts, had preached in his last sermon at St. John's of his dream for this hope also.

So, as is the case with seeds of ministry, others plant seeds, and then God does the nurturing, so that those seeds mature and even spread into the soil of other lives. So it was for me, as I encountered one person after another who told me their stories.

One of those persons was James Preston, who came, one month after I was appointed pastor, to be the associate pastor with me. The impact of James Preston upon the life and ministry of St. John's cannot be stressed too highly. Such a gifted man of grace and truth bundled into a short, stocky, body of enthusiasm and joy--few of us had expected or encountered. He led our youth, who thrived and who learned much about serving with joy. He was a superb preacher, liturgist, and teacher, and filled with inexhaustible energy for love of the church and of Christ.

One night, after a long committee meeting at St. John's, he and I were in the office alone, about to activate the security system before locking the church for the night. As we stood in the outer office, James seemed very nervous, and as only James can do, his fingers on both hands began moving furiously waving at each other. "I have something to tell you, Bobby," and then he shared his story. And I said: "O.K!" We hugged and together we continued our ministry at St. John's...but along a path which led ultimately to St. John's becoming a Reconciling Congregation.

James left us a year and a half later to join the national staff of the Reconciling Ministry Network in Chicago. By that time, his book, *We Were Baptized Too*, co-authored with his friend

and colleague in ministry, Marilyn Bennett Alexander, was near completion and later published by Westminster Press.

After James left, many members of St. John's to whom he had revealed his story began discussing the possibility of St. John's moving along the journey of becoming a Reconciling Congregation. But—we were not there yet.

Just prior to James leaving to join the network in Chicago, one other seed was planted, the seed of PFLAG. One morning, Betty Dotts called me and told me of the need for this organization and she told me of a mother, named Cathy, whose son was gay and a student in Tech. Cathy was a leader with the national PFLAG organization and she wanted to help start a chapter in Lubbock, Texas. But—they needed a place where this meeting could be held safely and "discreetly." I told Betty that I was happy to support this possibility but that I wanted to have the Board of Trustees at St. John's to give its approval and support. To make a long story short, our Board of Trustees gave its wholehearted support and Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays started meeting at St. John's.

With its presence, and also the fact that several gays and lesbians began worshipping at St. John's, we, as a church, began listening more and more to the stories of pain, rejection, and longing for acceptance, inclusion, and dignity by the church, and particularly, this church, which had as its motto, *Open Hearts, Open Arms, Open Minds*.

Well, the seeds of unrest in my soul, and the seeds planted in so many other lives within St. John's, were transplanted into the soil of a committee appointed by the church council, to study the possibility of our becoming a Reconciling Congregation. The "Committee on Reconciling Ministry" was chaired by Tim Floyd, who taught at the Texas Tech Law School. Its membership was made up of a cross section of

many views in the beginning, some of whom were totally committed to our church becoming a reconciling church, and others of whom were not totally supportive, but who were also willing to be part of the process.

This committee led the church in study that spanned four years of discussion, open forums, special classes, sermons, and many, many meetings both informally and formally. Some of our gay and lesbian friends openly told their stories in various Sunday school classes who invited them to do so. We invited pastors from two United Methodist Churches that had already become Reconciling Congregations in Texas, Sid Hall from Trinity Church in Austin and John Thornburg from Northaven Church in Dallas, to come to St. John's for open forums of discussion and exploration.

It was not an easy journey, but we were now on the road, and even though there were many times of painful losses, we stayed on the journey. We lost long time members who were dear and sacred to the life and legacy of St. John's. Many of these persons and families met with me personally to share their hurt, their anger, and their love for this church that was so very sacred in their journey of faith. We met and listened and in most cases, as these persons made the decision to leave St. John's, they did so with the assurance of our love and blessings. To be reconciling, we had learned, meant the inclusion of all—even those who cannot join the journey or stay with the journey.

The church received letters of criticism and letters of support. Our Bishop and District Superintendent disapproved of the direction to which we were moving. The District Superintendent met with the Staff-Parish Committee and the church council, and we discussed the direction of St. John's in several charge conference meetings. We, as a church, knew we were marching to a far different drum-beat in the Northwest Texas Conference, a drum-beat not in synch

with the prevailing theology or direction of the conference. We were even the subject of open disapproval in the sessions of annual conference.

Finally, after four years of study, discussion, heights, depths, and many, many, more stories shared by people who now risked telling the story of their own struggle for love and acceptance or by their moms and dads and loved ones and friends, the date was set for an all church conference at which we would vote on whether or not St. John's United Methodist Church would become a Reconciling Congregation.

The Reconciling Committee had drafted a Mission Statement of Reconciliation which if approved by the vote of this All-Church Conference would officially declare that St. John's United Methodist Church henceforth would be a Reconciling Congregation.

The date set for this meeting was Sunday, October 18, 1998. The meeting was highly publicized and every effort was made to insure that all members of St. John's were invited and urged to be present for this meeting. It was to be held following the morning worship services, immediately after the 10:30 a.m. service had concluded.

Our District Superintendent, Earl Blair, opened the meeting and then turned the rest of the meeting over to Jo Carr, a much beloved member of St. John's charge conference, and a retired elder and former District Superintendent. Jo then presided as the meeting continued for the next approximately 2 hours. Over 200 persons remained for this meeting.

Tim Floyd, the chair of the Reconciling Committee, presented a summary of the four year study, and then placed before the conference copies of the Reconciling Mission Statement. Jo

opened the meeting to discussion and debate, and those who were in full support, those who were not supportive, and those who were uncertain, were given the opportunity to be heard. It was truly a time of grace and gentleness prevailing. All spoke with gentle dignity and love. All were received in the same spirit.

After Jo Carr was assured that all who wanted to speak had been given the opportunity to be heard, she called for the vote, which was a written ballot distributed to every member who was in attendance. The ballots were collected and counted. The count was 85% in favor of St. John's becoming a Reconciling Congregation.

We are still on the journey of learning how to live and to be a Reconciling Congregation.

Some ask: "Did we do the right thing?"

I offer one closing story. One day during those four years of discussion-- a day when I was wondering, "Are we doing the right thing?"-- I received a phone call from a former member of a church I had served when I was a very young, newer pastor. He wanted to come see me and we set a time for the meeting.

He came to my office at the appointed time. We shared memories of our younger years in the church we had known. We talked about our children and where they were living, how they were doing, etc.etc. He named each one of his three and proudly told me of their good lives, all of them professionals in their own field. He saved one of the three for last, and as he told me about this young man, who was a very fine physician living in another state, his voice wavered and broke as his lips quivered.

Then, he told me of a recent visit he and his wife had experienced with this son in his home in another metropolitan city. He told about the young man's accomplishments as physician and how renowned he had become in his special field of medicine. Then, he told me of the visit. His son had spent the day taking his mom and dad sightseeing around the city and in the surrounding mountains. After a beautiful day together, they returned home.

That night, after dinner, the son told his parents, "I need to talk with you. I have something I must tell you." He told his story. They learned that the son they loved through all the years was a son who, for many years, had suffered pain as he lived in a hidden and secret life. He was gay. He told of trying to change. He told of dating girls and knowing this was not right for him. He told of turning to the church and feeling unwanted and judged.

Finally, he realized his own beauty and goodness as he was—a gay man. He chose to move to another city where he could live his life without hiding. He spoke of his love for his mother and father—and how he wanted to be the son they thought he was, but that he loved them enough to tell them of the son before them.

That night, his parents cried throughout the long hours. The next day, while their son went to work, they talked and cried together. By the time he came home that evening, they were ready to talk again. They realized and affirmed that this son they had loved through all his childhood and youth had been, and still was, their beautiful, beloved son. They hugged him and affirmed their unconditional love.

As the father concluded, he then spoke of the church he had known. His voice again quaked and his lips quivered as he asked me: "Bobby, where can my son find a church that will

love him, welcome him and accept him?" At that point, I asked him if he had heard about the Reconciling Ministries and also if he had heard about the journey St. John's was travelling at that time. He had heard nothing about either.

So, I told him about the Reconciling Congregations network. He asked me if I knew whether or not there was such a congregation in the city where his son was living. I had in my files a listing of all the Reconciling Churches at that time, and in the listing, I found the names of two or three Reconciling United Methodist Churches available for his son to consider.

I will never forget the look of utter joy and freedom that filled this father's face when I told him, "Yes, there is a Reconciling Church that will welcome your son."

Now, St. John's United Methodist Church, a Reconciling Congregation, is among those listed in that network of hope for those such as this family who may be asking today:

"Where can my son, daughter, brother, sister, friend---find a Church that will welcome and include them?"

I give thanks for the journey that continues to offer hope for those who seek, for those who knock. We're here to say: Welcome!

The General Conference Legislation Task Group and the Reconciling Committee at St. John's wish to express their deepest appreciation to Bobby McMillan for accepting the invitation to prepare this report. Rev. McMillan was the senior pastor at St. John's from August 1, 1992 to August 1, 2002.

St. John's votes to be reconciling congregation

By **BETH PRATT**
A-J Religion Editor
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Married and still in high school, at age 18 Marvin Daniels confided in his Baptist pastor of 10 years that he was confused about his sexuality.

"I didn't know what it was all about," Daniels said. "I was asking the question."

The pastor told him he would need to leave the church, and on the following Sunday "preached fire and brimstone."

There was no one else to talk to, Daniels said. "I had known him a long time, but he couldn't deal with it. Religion was a very important part of my life."

He did not tell his parents what had happened. Keeping Lubbock as his base, he left to work on ranches and in the oil fields for several years. Later, he took a temporary job at Methodist Hospital, and 21 years later, he is still working there.

Martha Wright, 49, seriously considered going into the ministry when she was in her late teens and early 20s, but

Rebecca Hunt, Tim Floyd, Lucile Ford, Rev. Bobby McMillan, and Carolyn Maples hold hands in front of St. John's United Methodist Church Thursday afternoon.
Lance Moler/Staff Photographer



her Presbyterian pastor told her "the world had enough do-gooders," she said, later realizing that his reaction was because she was female.

She was 27 when she met the woman she has lived with for 22 years. "Neither of us had been involved in the mainstream church for 20 years," she said.

More than two years ago, the couple began attending St. John's United Methodist Church.

"I had heard good things about the church in general," she said. "We went in as a couple, and the church was friendly."

Daniels, 50, started attending St. John's several years ago and has been a member for 21/2 years now.

All placed their memberships while the church was undergoing an intensive four-year study about whether it wanted to be publicly identified as a reconciling congregation.

Gathering their courage, Wright said, "we decided to put a face and name to it and spoke to a Sunday school class. I became active on the committee."

On Oct. 18, in church conference, the congregation voted to become a reconciling congregation. With 210 present, the vote was 155 in favor and 38 against.

The Rev. Bobby McMillan, pastor, said he was overwhelmed with the support. Now, he said, "I'm trying to say the real work of reconciliation is how we welcome each other in our disagreement."

Some who were not in favor were "not so much against welcoming and affirming, but against taking on the label," McMillan said.

Tim Floyd served as chairman of the task force.

"It's been a long, hard road, but I'm glad in the end we took our time. I don't want anybody to feel we were forcing anything on them," Floyd said.

The church wrote its own statement, he said. "All the label (reconciling) means "is we have made an official statement as a church that we want to be open and welcoming to all persons. That's really all it is."

Wright became familiar with St. John's because the Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays had its monthly meetings at the church.

"I heard Bobby speak," she said. "I am thrilled that St. John's has taken this action. Until churches take this step, things won't change in the community."

Older people have been more accepting than younger ones, she added. Although she and her partner have opted to be open with the church family about their relationship, they have safety and job concerns about being identified publicly, she said, mentioning the recent murder of Matthew Shepard.

"We've been very careful where we've fought our battles to be who we are. St. John's is the broadest area we've ever had, and it has not come without pain," Wright said.

What they really want at St. John's, and elsewhere, "is just have everybody accepted as people; we're all human," she said.

McMillan said, "We don't have what a lot of people call the gay agenda. They just wanted to be a part of the life of the church without pretensions. People who know them (the gay and lesbian members) are seeing each other with new eyes."

The process of coming to the decision "has been one of the most demanding, stressful things I've ever been through, and at the same time, the most fulfilling moments of my entire ministry," McMillan added.

The church conference began at about 11:45 a.m. and lasted until 1:30 p.m. "It was one of the most gentle, loving conferences I've ever sat through," McMillan said. "There was no meanness. People gently and deeply expressed where they stood and how they felt. There was no applauding. One of my members said for him it was a spiritual experience, and I didn't know where he stood.

"We spent four years on it-- the heights, depths, struggle, all the gamut of anger and grief. We did lose people we still love, and we gained wonderful, beautiful people."

One of the most important statements in the church's reconciling document, he said, is "We do not expect everybody to agree...but to be a part of our journey..."

The focus of being known as a reconciling church is not only "dealing with gays and lesbians, but also with their moms, dads, brothers, sisters and their children who are sitting in our congregations. They need to know there's a place in the church for their loved ones to be who they are," McMillan said.

"My own journey on this began many years before I came to St. John's, the result of parents and family members coming to talk to me about their children and loved ones. It was then I began to listen with new ears--the mid-'70s for me. Then

gays and lesbians began talking to me from a pastoral standpoint."

Floyd said the resolutions to be a confessing and a transforming conference at the Northwest Texas Annual Conference in June provided an extra impetus for St. John's to take action.

"Obviously, we all should be transforming," he said, but in the context of those resolutions, it was "telling this group of people (homosexuals) they've got to be different before they are welcome. We don't require that of anybody else. We're all sinners. I don't like the idea of singling out one particular group."

In terms of the Judicial Court's ruling, Floyd said, "at the conference level, that may make sense."

At the church, he said, "we weren't necessarily trying to adopt a label, part of a movement or debate. I really don't think that was the spirit our church approached that with, but in part it was a reaction to what the conference did in June."

The main thing for him, Floyd said, is that he came away with "a real good feeling about our congregation, and my faith in the church affirmed, mainly because we can love each other as a body even though we don't necessarily agree."

The task force will continue, he said, because "there is still work of reconciliation to be done. Our statement is a clear journey toward reconciliation.

"I'm not sure you ever get there, but we're called to keep striving toward it."

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