

The Church in a windy place

by EARL F. PALMER

Every two years representatives from each presbytery of our denomination meet for two weeks. This year, that gathering of pastors and laity made a recommendation to our whole church that a sentence in the *Book of Order* be removed. This sentence presently states the behavior expectation of those ordained to leadership in our church as elders, deacons, and pastors: "to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness." Fortunately that two-week assembly did not in fact remove those words because our Presbyterian governing tradition requires that such a change can only happen by the action of the whole church when each local presbytery receives the recommendation of that Assembly action and then vote presbytery-by-presbytery, "Yes" or "No."

I believe this recommendation is going to be defeated as the presbyteries across our country will vote on this proposed change to our *Book of Order*. This raises a major question: *What ministry role should a congregation like mine take as a part of our denomination in such a time as this?*

First, I believe we should take responsibility to weigh in at the presbytery level, which is one important place for advocacy and influence. We are now and will be a vital and active part of our Presbytery of Seattle. We also need to positively express our convictions as a part of the whole church dialogue. In this regard our session adopted and published a statement of theological affirmation in February 2002, titled *Union in Christ*, which also included a pastoral letter.

But even more, we need to live out this affirmation. As a fellowship we seek to be faithful to our faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ here and now, day by day, so we model hope in the way we share our ministry to and among all people, wherever they are in their personal journeys. The ministry of love toward people in Christ's name really happens in the local congregation. Therefore we need to be a congregation that is growing in grace as we grow in age so we have something good to share.

Also we must not forget that as a fellowship of real people in a real place we have an impact on the whole church incrementally and concretely. We im-

part the whole church as we do our own job of teaching faithfully the whole gospel and training men and women to move beyond our doors and into the life and mission of the whole church. This is happening and we should never underestimate the broad influence that one local congregation like ours is able to have as we are committed to that incremental strategy. A large institution like a denomination is itself changed by people who are changed.

Finally we need to remember that the Christian church itself is a mission field. The turbulent line of history goes through the church and therefore we should not be surprised, nor should we become disoriented, by the fact that every cultural wind and advocacy of society as a whole is a challenging reality in the daily life of the Christian church. Our tasks are to stay faithful to the Biblical witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, to listen to all who bring their concerns and hurt with them, to share the hope in Christ that is greater than we are and is by God's grace able to integrate the parts of our lives that sometimes seem to us to be fragments. Jesus is the Redeemer who hears brokenness and who draws us together in his forever family. This is the central fact that makes all the difference.

Someone asked me just this summer, "Do you ever think about leaving the Presbyterian Church when your General Assembly passes resolutions that you feel are wrong-headed?" I answered, "No," because the secret of the future health of our national church is not found in a two-week meeting in an issue, but in each local congregation. As long as the Gospel can be preached in a local church then the whole church can be renewed; and, since the Gospel can be affirmed in the local church, then why should I leave the windy place for another windy place? I want to stay and watch what happens when lives are changed by Christ's love.

I cannot think of a better place for this to happen.

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