

A Narrative History of the Reconciliation Movement in WUMC

[From the Annual Service of Reconciliation – 2000]

- compiled by Laura Thorne

In November 1983, the Administrative Council of Wallingford United Methodist Church was asked by one of its members to open a Seattle Chapter of Affirmation.

This marked the beginning of a short period of about two months that lead, initially, to Wallingford's confirmation as an Open and Affirming, and, later, as a Reconciling United Methodist Church. It was a powerful and formative period that planted seeds, which have grown and born fruit. And it initiated a journey in the sixteen years since, wherein we continue to define and explore what it means to embody love, as Christ did: sometimes radical, often risky, truthful, generous and open to its varied forms. As we look to the future, and to the challenge and delight of witnessing the growth of the Reconciling movement (there are now well over 151 Reconciling United Methodist Churches), we take some time now, to remember our own roots, and to draw on the strengths and courage of those who embarked in the uncharted waters of those early years.

What follows is a brief and patchy history of the birth of the reconciling movement within this particular church. It is not by any means comprehensive. Gathered from over-the-phone or in-person interviews and a few documents in church archives, it is a messy collection, and therefore, one might say, rather biblical. Please note that the language is limited by the understanding of that time, which primarily referenced homosexual, or gay/ lesbian and heterosexual orientations. Now we recognize that sexual preference and orientation is God's gift to each and every one of us, so our outreach has expanded to include bisexual and transgendered persons. Like the movement itself, it is part of an ongoing tale. We invite others to add their stories by letting one of the RC committee members know, so that we can continue collecting and understanding not only who we were, but also who we are meant to become to one another.

To provide some perspective, Wallingford UMC was founded in 1910 as a congregation of the United Brethren in Christ, and merged - or morphed- into the

United Methodist Church in about 1968.

During the late 1960's and 1970's the population of the neighborhood had aged and the membership of the church began to decline. By 1979, membership was low and a young pastor, just out of seminary, was appointed. Soon after Rev. Rebecca Parker's arrival, young people and families with young children began joining with the older members of the congregation to become involved in the work of the church.

In 1983, even personal computer technology was in its infancy. A note in the church newsletter at the time, called, *The Well-Wisher*, excitedly announced the purchase of a new typewriter for \$200, which would eliminate the flying capitals in *The Well-Wisher*. In November of this year, Chuck Richards asked the church's Administrative Council to sponsor a Seattle Chapter of Affirmation, and to consider publicly welcoming lesbians and gay men into the church. He later explains why he took the risk, saying, "I wanted a place where my daughter would be safe to grow up without judgment about having a father who was gay. I had to hope that it would be a place where I could stay with my kid."

The relatively small Ad Council met in early November to discuss the proposal. At the beginning there was little movement one way or the other. A number of people were clearly for sponsorship, but others were as yet undeclared. Former members who were present at this meeting later differed in their recollection of sequence of the speakers, but where all stories converged was in the sense that it was the remarks of two people, Cecil Taylor and Marge Kendall, who turned the tide in the direction that would shape the church for years to come. One former member recalls when Marge Kendall, a long time church member, stood up. About fifty-eight years old, Marge was a dignified woman, who carried herself with an air of gravity. Often she was seen with a fur stole resting like a mantle on her shoulders. Her clothes proclaimed her to be the moderate and serious woman she was. She didn't believe that the church should be involved in politics. She had been a director of the children's choir and had lived across the street in an old colonial-styled house for years. Since she'd moved, Marge hadn't

A Narrative History of the Reconciliation Movement in WUMC

been seen in the church much in recent months, and so people were surprised to see her show up at this crucial meeting where Affirmation was on the agenda.

Heads turned as Marge said, "I'm divorced. When I was divorced there were people in the church who treated me badly, and I was very hurt by that. I don't think that people should be treated that way. No one should be shunned in the church, which ought to be a place of welcome." She surprised everyone with a forceful endorsement of the Affirmation proposal. Cecil Taylor also rose and said: "We were given a command from God to love your neighbor as yourself and God didn't specify who our neighbors were. We cannot call ourselves Christians if we reject our neighbors... God calls us to be in relationship with everyone..."

These two speeches were pivotal events in the course of the meeting. The vision of the Council galvanized in excited discussion.

Julia Kruger remembers that after this there was a sense among the group that "of course this is the kind of congregation we want to be." She says, "It is interesting to speculate what might have happened if we hadn't taken that vote... I think the soul of the community would have died." The vote was unanimous with one abstention. Some of the people at that meeting also included Pat Nauman, Alan Sherbrooke, Bill Ready, Chuck Richards, and, of course, the pastor, Rev. Rebecca Parker.

The following Sunday, Rev. Parker announced the results of the vote and preached a sermon about Affirmation.

Then, the church erupted into heated debate. In the ensuing weeks much was said about process and people for and against the vote wanted to express their feelings and thoughts. Coincidentally, the next Ad Council meeting was also a Charge Conference, since it was held in December.

So with District Superintendent Frank Brown presiding, a motion was made to reconsider the Affirmation sponsorship, on grounds that it did not include enough community process. This motion passed, with a small handful voting against it. Community discussions were sponsored, and full church discussion of the issue commenced.

In 1983, there was only one other United Methodist Church in Seattle that was publicly open to gays and lesbians, and it was in Capitol Hill. The term "Reconciling Congregation" wasn't to be formally adopted until the 1984 General Conference. Lay leaders from the community organized discussions as calls came into the pastor. This issue for many people was very new, strange, and frightening.

For some who had not yet developed opinions on the issue, or who were reticent to open doors to lesbians and gay men, the period was formative and memorable. Meetings were held, and letters were presented in the church newsletter.

Just prior to the second Ad Council vote to reconsider Affirmation sponsorship, Rev. Parker wrote an article describing the vote and its implications in the November 30th issue of *The Well-Wisher*. While there is only space for a small section of the article here, we encourage those who are interested in further details to read it in its entirety along with all of the church newsletters from this period. A copy can be found in the church archives (currently, the attic.). Here is a short section from it:

"Recognizing and affirming that Christ calls us to create a community in which all people are welcomed, and received with joy and love, and not judged, our Administrative Council at its November meeting unanimously adopted a proposal asking our church to become a sponsoring congregation for a newly-forming Seattle Chapter of Affirmation.

Affirmation is a national organization of Lesbian/Gay United Methodists whose purpose is to help extend the ministry of the church to those whose sexual and affectional preference is often cause for exclusion, harsh judgment, and rejection.

Though the Council is aware of the disquiet some may feel in reaction to our decision, my feeling was that we reached our decision with a sense of joy and hope. Joy at the goodness of the good news: all are welcomed by God. Hope at the possibility that as we extend the right hand of fellowship to those who have been excluded, not only those who are welcomed but those who do the welcoming will feel the reality of Love more deeply.

A Narrative History of the Reconciliation Movement in WUMC

*In this season of Advent we celebrate our anticipation of the birth of Christ. I am celebrating in my heart by contemplating this truth: where Love is sought and expressed, the Advent of the Christ Child is experienced. And where the Advent of the Christ Child is experienced, God's people find themselves embarking on Adventures. Ours is an Adventure in Affirmation. And what we are affirming is Love.”**

Bill Ready remembers approaching the issue with some trepidation. He was one of the few local homeowners with Republican placards on his lawn. Having joined the church in 1981 with his wife Fra Na and son Matthew, he worried about Methodist social action at that time. When the Affirmation issue came up, he wondered things like, “What will be the impact if no one else is doing it? Will we offend some regular churchgoers? And how will the church change as a result of such a decision?”

For many people, like Bill, the discussions and forums lead to a deeper connection with a sense of relationship to himself, to others in the community, and to Christ. He explained that the cornerstone concept, that which allowed him to come to his position in support of Affirmation, was the sense that it was about how best to love his neighbor. All the fears boiled down to the simple truth: it was his duty to love, not to judge or shun, and the rest would take care of itself. He remembers Marge's statement, and also Cecil's words about a biblical call to right action, to loving action. Bill's memory of that time, sixteen years later, is rich with affection and compassion for the pastor, the church leaders, the laypeople and for himself as he recalls the sincere seeking, honesty, and faith that spawned a crucial shift in many hearts, including his own. For Bill, although he is not currently a member of this community, the legacy of that time continues to shape his Christian life today.

Deb Cruzen was co-chairperson of the Board of Lay Deacons at the time. Forums were held to provide opportunities for discussion. These were well attended. In a January 1984 issue of the church newsletter she writes about the process: “We didn't all agree on what is right or wrong, good or bad, but one of the real positive points that came out was that it's alright for people to

disagree. Our consensus was that ultimately none of the fears, concerns, or questions can outweigh the calling to love each other and love all who come to our house of God to worship God. There are many possibilities for the future, but what almost all of us agreed upon was that the real challenge, despite the fears, was to take each other's hands, and have the faith that God will be the light that guides us to the future together. “

In the midst of these exploratory discussions, and in answer to some expressed concerns about the mission of the church, Alan Sherbrooke, Chair of Ad Council, wrote an impassioned invitation in the church newsletter.

Here, excerpted from his larger letter, he writes, *“I urge you to attend these meetings and to reflect on how accepting or rejecting Affirmation's proposal would affect the Church and its efforts to achieve what the Ad Council and the Charge Conference have declared to be our primary goal for 1984: evangelism in its broadest and best sense... meaning, bringing God and human beings closer together. “* He goes on to say, *“...The Church can be inclusive, but it cannot be all things to all people. The Council voted to include gay/lesbian persons, not to exclude those who believe homosexuality is a sin. Those who leave do so because they choose not to belong to a church family which includes and accepts homosexual as well as heterosexual persons. While the Administrative Council's action in including gay/lesbian persons will estrange some members from the Church family, surely it is also true that excluding gay/lesbian persons, or including them only as second-class citizens, would estrange other persons. I therefore ask that you consider the Affirmation matter as one going to the heart of our mission as a Church to uphold both our congregation's commitment to evangelism and the Discipline's statement that homosexual persons, no less than heterosexual persons, are individuals of sacred worth, who need the ministry and guidance of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship which enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with the self.”*

David Curley also remembers this time. His wife, Jayme, had joined the Church right away in early 1983 after attending a newcomer's retreat, which, he said, “turned out to be a walk up some mountain.” He, on the other hand, had no desire, whatsoever,

A Narrative History of the Reconciliation Movement in WUMC

to join and only attended services with glowering reluctance. He sat in the back pew with arms and legs crossed, listening to sermons but refusing to take communion.

After several months of this, he was asked to join the Social Concerns committee. He agreed, but during services remained firmly planted in the back of the church. His curiosity had been peaked, but it wasn't until the Ad Council vote to reconsider the Affirmation decision that he found himself fervently engaged in church debate. He says, "So there I was passionately telling people what to do and I wasn't a member of the Church. So I decided, I wasn't gonna leave. Not being a member, I felt I didn't really have a right to tell members what to do, and since the community was deciding something I cared about very deeply I decided I had to join so that my opinion could count. "

A January issue of *The Well-Wisher* printed a letter he wrote in support of Affirmation.

Most of it is reprinted here: "...I would like to respond in support of Affirmation by remembering a story about my best friend in high school (whom I will call Robert). He and I knew each other from the fifth grade on and used to argue about religion. You may imagine that this set us apart somewhat from all the other kids we knew in the fifth grade.

Actually, everybody in the fifth grade knew Robert was different, but you should understand that he did not tell me and I did not let myself know that this difference was his sexual orientation, homosexuality, until after we had graduated from high school.

In high school Robert tried very hard to escape from homosexuality. (There is no question in my mind that he in any sense chose it; it was a fact of his life, although in the end he did accept it.)

He tried to escape in two contradictory ways, which followed each other in phases during high school and got more extreme and hopeless. The first way was church and the second was high school - that is, in the second he tried to be like everyone else, which we all knew was ridiculous, and in the offhand, tyrannical way of the young we told him so.

In his church phases, Robert converted to Catholicism and practiced confession, repentance and penance. He went to mass daily. I imagined him on his knees. I know that he prayed for grace and deliverance from

homosexuality. I also know that the church seemed to promise him that if he just was sincere enough in repentance, or fervent enough in devotion, or had faith enough (only the size of a mustard seed!) Gods grace would come upon him and he would be cleansed and heterosexual.

The fact is, to his despair (and delight), in these church phases he met other young men. In some sense they recognized each other, sought each other out (meanwhile praying and so on as before), shared life stories, discovered similarities and fell in love, like all teenagers. The fact is church no more allowed Robert to escape homosexuality than high school did.

For me there are two lessons in the story ... The first is that homosexuality, as an orientation of one's being, is not chosen and therefore cannot be a sin (sixteen years later David says that his views on that have changed, and that he believes that neither one's sexual preference nor orientation, are sins). The second is that we as a church must not make promises to homosexuals that we cannot keep.

I believe that what the church truly can promise homosexuals is exactly what it promises all of us: support in the struggle to live our lives (our sexual lives and our other lives) with Christian love. My understanding is that this is the intent of Affirmation."

In January when Ad Council met again to reconsider the vote for Affirmation, the vote was unanimously approved. The following Sunday, eight people left the church, although it is unclear whether there were other reasons for some of the departures. The Sunday following that, David Curley joined the church along with two others: Dave Thoreson and Rebecca Ellis.

Alan Sherbrooke, Chair of Ad Council, announced the final decision in *The Well-Wisher*, thanking the community for its participation in the discussions and writing.

He wrote, "As one participant said, "This was one of the best community building things we have done in years...." The (Ad) Council has also created a special liaison committee to provide support and nurturing for both those who come to our Church family through Affirmation and the members of our church family who are uncomfortable or uncertain of their feelings about gay and lesbian persons. The liaison committee will try to bring all of us closer together so that all of us, regardless of our personal or

A Narrative History of the Reconciliation Movement in WUMC

theological views about homosexuality, are included in our Church family through shared faith, trust and mutual respect.

"One might ask why it is still important to talk about this, why we still have to fight to make space for love that is sacred and safe. Chuck's response to this question was to recall a moment some years ago when a church friend, Hanifah Murphin, brought her daughter over to play with Chuck's daughter, Phoebe. Chuck's boyfriend, Steve, was on his way out and brushed Chuck's cheek with a kiss. Hanifah's daughter observed, and said, "Mommy, men don't kiss men." And Hanifah smiled broadly and said without a pause, "Sure, you see some men do! "

Memories collect, like gifts, for all of us who have been part of a Reconciling Church community. In the early years that these Annual Services of Reconciliation were held, many who attended were, as Chuck puts it, "strangers in a dark sanctuary... people of amazing quality. It was a way that they were able to connect and create a community." At annual conference friendships have been formed and the Reconciling dinner has become a tradition.

*Partial Excerpt from Rev. Rebecca Parker's letter:
Our decision to be a host church for Affirmation means:

1. We will offer space for monthly meetings of an Affirmation group, which will meet for fellowship and discussion.
2. We will communicate to the Greater Seattle Area that lesbians/gays are openly welcome to be part of our church; we will extend an invitation to church membership to those who indicate interest; and we will seek as a church family to become a community where everyone feels free to be themselves without fear of rejection.

The Administrative Council's decision followed an in-depth discussion in which Council member shared their thoughts and feelings about the church and lesbian/gay concerns. Though there was diversity of opinion, one shared conviction clearly emerged: we are called by Christ to exclude no one from the ministry of the church, to be a community that manifests the good news of God's all-inclusive Love.

Attended by heterosexuals as well as gay/lesbian/ bisexual and transgender men and women, it is made safe since it isn't obvious who is what orientation or affectional preference. Unlabeled, but united, Chuck says, "It is like being gathered and held and then blown gently out again... and none of this was anticipated in 1983."

Ultimately what a church does has more impact than anything it says. Let us hope that we can continue to be brave, to take risks and to be servants of love, as Jesus was. Let us continue to welcome the gifts that we are to one another. This is our mission, our challenge and our joy. And it is the legacy we give, year in and year out, to the children of this community: joy and confidence in who they are and in what makes a family. They have a basis for understanding social justice, because they have grown up in a place where it is practiced. And children who grow up supported by integrity and kindness have a chance to live this way in their communities. This is the blessing and hope of what reconciling can mean: experiencing God in our midst and recognizing the sacredness in ourselves, in each other and in the world.