

We Could Have Been So Wrong!

By Pastor Hartmut Kramer-Mills

First Reformed Church, New Brunswick, New Jersey

Baptist pastor Oliver “Buzz” Thomas wrote during the winter of 2006/07 in *USA TODAY* on gay and lesbian issues: “*It’s happened to Christianity before, most famously when we dug in our heels over Galileo’s challenge to the biblical view that the Earth, rather than the sun, was at the center of our solar system. You know the story. Galileo was persecuted for what turned out to be incontrovertibly true. For many, especially in the scientific community, Christianity never recovered.*”

Before I give an account on the corresponding position of First Reformed Church, I would like to begin with a few personal remarks, hoping that this might make the topic less abstract.

My interest in gay and lesbian issues did not develop first from the question of what is scientifically right or wrong. Neither did it first come to light when two of the cousins in our extended family came out as gay and brought boyfriends to our family gatherings. By then, the base of my opinion was already shaped.

I was born in East Germany into a family of active church goers and spent years in elementary school and high school not being allowed to talk about what we did in church. I had a divided childhood. I remember how fearful I was one afternoon as a 7-year old on my way to religious instruction in the private home of the catechist. I had left our house alone (things were safer in the police state back then); but I had forgotten to change from my house shoes. With the imagination of a 7-year old, I was sure that this little oversight would reveal to every pedestrian in the street that I was on my way to religious instruction. I was so scared that I remember the incident today. Since then I know what it means emotionally to have to live with two identities.

Later I was fortunate to enjoy religious instruction in a public high school in West Germany. For the first time, I was exposed to the writings of church leaders like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller. Both had given voice to the Confessing Church during the Hitler regime. Niemöller later became president of the Protestant Church in the West-German state where I lived; when teachers quoted him, it meant more than a paragraph in some book.

Niemöller once described his experience of Nazi Germany like this:

When the Nazis arrested the Communists,

I said nothing; after all, I was not a Communist.

When they locked up the Social Democrats,

I said nothing; after all, I was not a Social Democrat.

When they arrested the trade unionists,

I said nothing; after all, I was not a trade unionist.

When they arrested me, there was no longer anyone who could protest.

I do not remember if was it the teacher who introduced us to this text, or was it somebody else, but very soon the line was inserted, *When they arrested the homosexuals, I said nothing; after all I was not gay.*” Since then I realized, the fight for one minority is, in principle, not different from the fight for any other minority. Or, vice versa, what happens to one minority happens to all of us.

Coming from the monoculture of East Germany, I enjoy living in a multicultural society. It has been a liberating experience. Considering that I grew up with the anxiety only a police state can produce, diversity and world openness provide me today with the security and peace of mind that I need in order to feel blessed. Nothing is more fear-producing to me than the memory of narrow-mindedness that once declared one perspective to be the norm of all others and then tried to suppress them.

First Reformed Church is a congregation that provides the acceptance, diversity and political awareness I cherish. In December 2006 our leading board, the Consistory, received an overture signed by four women who are members of the church. The overture asked Consistory to declare the church welcoming and inclusive *“regardless of our differences in understanding particular texts of the Bible.”* It also asked for an amendment of the church’s bylaws to include a statement that *“candidates for the ordained offices of the church (Deacons, Elders, Pastors) will not be discriminated against on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, or physical ability.”*

This overture was preceded by several months of meetings of a task force on inclusiveness, and a congregational meeting that discussed the process of becoming open and affirming. Consistory adopted the overture, published it in the newsletter of January 2006 and invited more comments from the congregation. One month later it amended the bylaws in accordance with the overture.

We hope that this process will bear much fruit in years to come; that it will enrich our life as a church and continue to make us sensitive whenever inclusiveness is threatened. We also hope that other congregations might be encouraged to embark on similar developments – the Reformed churches in Metuchen and Highland Park declared themselves open and affirming shortly thereafter.

This is the letter that the pastors sent out to the congregation of First Reformed Church, New Brunswick, NJ as they began their process in 2005.

Dear

The attention of our denomination has been drawn during the past months to the subject of homosexuality and the stance of the Christian church, and of our denomination in particular, in relation to practicing homosexual persons. The fact that the spotlight is on the subject now does not mean that the subject has been ignored in the past. In the recent past, attention has not led the denomination to a unified understanding. The 2004 General Synod's effort to return the subject to local congregations and classes simply drove discussion underground in some instances and off the radar screen in others. With this year's General Synod trial of the Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield, positions of individuals and congregations and classes seem to have hardened wherever they were and been broadcast; rhetoric is at a shrill pitch.

The signers of this letter have met twice in recent weeks to say that we want our congregation to be clear and public about who we are as we fling open our doors to those seeking a church home. We want too to be a voice in the denomination-wide discussion. Being vague or silent, we think, will only contribute to division and exclusion. But to be clear and public means to engage as a whole congregation (members, adherents, and friends alike) in determining *our* Reformed stance. We urge that that process begin right away. To that end, we suggest several different approaches and encourage suggestions of other approaches. Here is what we've come up with so far.

1. Talk with each other in pairs or small groups that will allow for exchanges of what we know, what we think, what we wonder, what our experience is, what our Biblical understanding is, what our Christian responsibility is.
2. Either on our own or, again, in pairs or small groups, make ourselves better informed, better equipped to have the discussion. In the early fall we will be dedicating the wonderful library space that Ethel Salamone is making possible. We aim to make available there some materials on homosexuality and Christianity, allowing all of us to get help as we ask "What does science say?" "What does sociology say?" "What does the Bible say and how do we interpret what the Bible says?"
3. From October 16-18, a conference called "Holy Relationships" will take place in New Brunswick. Some sessions will be held in our church. Would you like to take advantage of the opportunity to hear others discuss and debate their research and informed views? The conference registration is \$100, not an insignificant amount, obviously, but as the time approaches, feel free to ask if any money has been identified to help subsidize attendance. Or feel free to provide a "Scholarship"!
4. Have an adult education session with an outside speaker.

Please speak to any one of us about how you would like to participate in this process of inquiry, prayer for discernment, and striving for a unified, just position. Here are some features of that process that we think will be successful:

- frank talk,
 - careful and open-minded listening
 - individual willingness to think, pray, read, and discuss
 - constructive argument together rather than taking and defending sides
- recognition that we aren't likely to achieve perfect agreement but that we can, with the grace of God, move forward together in the spirit of our Reformed tradition's call to be always reforming.

We parted from our second get-together acknowledging that our starting point and our ending point needs to be obedience to Christ's commandment that we love the Lord our God with all that we are and that we love our neighbors as ourselves. It is in that spirit that we propose to engage each other. Any one of us will be willing to hear your suggestions for how to proceed and will willingly join in a conversation. We hope that you will take initiative to raise the subject with any of us and with each other.

Praying for God's blessing on our congregation and our denomination and on the Christian Church in all the world, we are yours sincerely.