

## STATEMENT TO HUDSON RIVER PRESBYTERY - SEPTEMBER 23, 2014

I am here to ask for forgiveness from this Presbytery and particularly those members of it who I harmed by a court case that I initiated in 1999 titled Benton et. al. versus Hudson River Presbytery. I became aware that Pastor Joe Gilmore of South Church in Dobbs Ferry was marrying same gender couples. While these ceremonies were called "holy unions," instead of marriages, there was a clear understanding, at least to me, that they were, in fact, weddings - indeed, Joe candidly admitted that to the NY Times. I asked this Presbytery to stop such ceremonies, whatever name they were known by, because I firmly believed they went against both Scripture and the PC(USA) Constitution. When this Presbytery voted by an overwhelming margin to allow such holy unions to continue, I took my case to court at the Synod and General Assembly levels. I was quite firm in my convictions that South Church and the Presbytery were wrong in allowing such unions. I am here today to repent of that position and apologize to you who were hurt by my actions, **and** apologize to the Presbytery as a whole for the time and money spent in what I now recognize was an incorrect thing to do.

Please indulge me in giving you a bit of background that will allow you to see why I did so, and then I'll explain why I am now in a position to say that I was wrong. I was raised as an atheist. I did not believe in **any** sort of God until I was almost 28 years old. My father was a lapsed Catholic who left the Church as a teen, and was quite convinced, sometimes strident, in his atheism. He was widely read and had a formidable intellect; I **never** thought about challenging his beliefs, and neither, to my knowledge, did either of my two brothers or my mother. His opinion was the worldview that I grew up with....it was "the way things were."

While working on a PhD in mass communication at the University of Minnesota, and due mainly to questions my young daughter was asking about life and death, I began a search for other answers. Atheism had never really satisfied me. I took a course in world religions and decided that Christianity gave the most satisfying answers about the world and life. I read through the New Testament - I had heard about Jesus Christ, but knew **nothing** about Him at all. I **cannot** claim that I made a decision to become a Christian because it happened when I was asleep. I had watched Billy Graham on tv (I had seen him previously because I knew him to be a good public speaker). But I did nothing after the broadcast that night except eat a snack and go to bed. In the morning, I awoke to find that I believed Jesus **was** who He claimed to be.

I began to feel restless about my PhD work - **not** that it was not going well - I just felt a tug to learn about God, and get to know and serve Him in the Church. The group that took me in and nurtured me was a very conservative group, Intervarsity Christian Fellowship. I resisted the inner urging toward seminary for a time, because I saw it as thwarting **my** plans for a career in teaching college, but several quite extraordinary incidents pushed me into going to Yale Divinity School. It was very difficult telling my atheistic parents of my conversion and decision to go to seminary because it was a repudiation of what they had taught me. They did not **reject** me, but had something of a "Where did we go wrong?" attitude. I became the "outcast" of the family, since no one else in my family moved away from atheism. Little did I realize then, how these feelings were much the same for so many of my sisters and brothers in the LGBTQ community.

Yale was not a comfortable place for me - it was a very diverse student body - Southern Baptists, Pentecostals, Mormons, agnostics. There was only a **very** small group of openly evangelical students, and I felt intimidated - surrounded by students who did not share my beliefs. I stayed for my three year degree, and found out that being in that atmosphere forced me to think hard about what I

believed, and to be able to defend it against others. I served two small rural Churches in PA, then a suburban Church in OH, and finally Bethlehem Church in this Presbytery. For the 28 years I was in full-time ministry, I **stayed firm** in my conservative convictions - the Bible was to be taken **on its face** as words **from God**.

That was comforting: I had read the Scriptures through at least three times, I thought that I **knew** the Word, that I **knew** God, and that I **knew** what He wanted. That sounds rather arrogant when I say it now. But today I realize that some of the firmness of my stand came out of fear. I had moved out of an atheistic background where life had **no over-arching meaning** - had **no** certainty for today **or** the future. We were creatures living on a small speck in an enormous and **indifferent** universe. And I had been transferred from that place into a **spacious and settled** place....a place where **God exists**, He is **connected** to this world, He has **spoken**, He has **acted** in history, and we can read **His words**. And His words are not abstract, but **concrete** and **living** and **vivid**. I had found something **solid and certain**, something to **hold onto** in a changing and turbulent world....and I was **not** going to let go. And so I soaked up the Bible - I felt secure in my view that what God had said was to be taken **as literally as possible**. I worried that if that notion was shaken, I would find myself back in a place where **nothing was sure and true any longer**. And the Scriptures included verses where God seemed to be **clearly** saying that homosexual relationships are **wrong....period**. And so I felt fully justified in taking my case to the Permanent Judicial Commissions of the Synod and the General Assembly. And while wishing does not change anything, looking back today, I wish I could take back the court case I filed.

Shortly after we left Bethlehem, in 2005, God began to challenge my settled convictions. A woman in my congregation - one of the most sincere and lovely Christians I have ever known, died of ovarian cancer, even though literally dozens of Churches and thousands of people were praying for her physical healing. Some of those praying for her were **convinced** that she would be physically healed, and declared as much. Her death shook me **to my roots**. All of a sudden I realized that I did not **"know"** God nearly as well as I believed I did. All of a sudden He was more **mysterious** than I had conceived Him to be. Thus began a long and intense struggle for more understanding: about **Him**, about **life**, and about **the Bible**.

For the past 9-10 months, I have been wrestling particularly over the subject of gay marriage. One question had to do with whether people in the LGBTQ community are born that way or have made a decision to live as such.

Two things in particular have caused my heart-change: first, the people I have come to know in more than a passing manner who are gay have convinced me thoroughly and completely that they did not **in any sense** choose to be gay - this is **who they are, and have been** since they first became aware of gender and sex. Some of them were students in my college classes who were willing to talk candidly about when they realized what their sexual orientation was. Not a **single one** said that it was an easy road, or something they would have chosen willingly - for most of them, it was fraught with the fear of disappointing or angering their families and friends and alienation from society in general. Some were older men, or women, who had lived together for decades. **All** of them spoke about the uncertainty and difficulty of living as authentic human beings, as they **really are**, in a culture where there are still many people who are prejudiced against homosexuality. How **hard** that must be to endure! Many of them talked about a deep love for God, but a wariness of the Church.

In addition, I watched some videos of people who were gay describing their pain and their struggles....one video in particular, "Wish me away," about country singer Chely Wright, broke my heart

**wide open** - it **devastated** me. From everything I could tell, she seems to be a lovely and sincere Christian - I have **no reason** to question her relationship with Christ. Finally, after **years** of concealing who she really was, she revealed her homosexuality. The anguish she displayed before she did that was particularly over the potential reaction of her parents...and rightfully so - her Dad accepted her, but her Mother shut her off. She also knew full well that other country music musicians might shun her and her fan base could desert her (and many did - in the year following the documentary, she was not invited to a single country music venue, and she received a large volume of hate mail, including death threats). To see that beautiful, kind and genuine woman tormented for years about losing the music career she loved as a result of trying to be who God created her to be was **too much** for me. To listen to her describe the moment when she almost blew her head off because of her shame for not being honest about who she was, was eye-opening and **gut-wrenching**.

Secondly, I began to re-read the Bible - I mean really **looking at it** again. One thing that I discovered was there are **many things** that are "abominations" in God's sight - they're **all through** the Old Testament. I mean there are **lots** of them, from eating a peace offering on the third day after it is given to God, to cursing your parents, to eating unclean animals (and, yes, I am aware of Peter's vision in Acts 12 which changed that restriction), to seven different things that are listed in Proverbs 6:16. And so I began to ask **why** the evangelical Church had singled out the behavior of **people who are lesbian or gay** to attach that label of "abomination" to.

I looked again **at divorce**, and realized that some passages of Scripture take an almost unequivocal stand against it. In Malachi 2:16, the Bible reads "**I hate divorce, says the Lord.**" Matthew 5:32 and 1 Corinthians 7:10f present two carefully-drawn exceptions, in cases of a spouse's adultery or where a non-Christian spouse deserts the family. But that's it. Scripture speaks against divorce in **very strong** language....and yet Churches in general don't apply those passages strictly anymore. They read them in the light of the Bible's **overall** message of grace and redemption in Christ. So **why** the prohibition against committed, faithful gay relationships? **Why** have we singled **them** out? To me, there is **no** logical or Biblical reason to do so.

And so it became a question for me of **basic fairness**. If you want to apply individual passages without reference to the Bible's overall message of God's grace, do so in **all** cases, and not just some. Tell divorced and remarried people that they are **also** "unrepentant sinners," or stop saying that to gay people.

And so here I am, some 15 years later, to apologize for what I did back then....for the pain and trouble I caused....for the part I played in holding back some of God's children from full acceptance in the Church....for trying to prohibit some of you from being the people God created you to be. I **accept responsibility** for what I did in judging others rather than extending the love of Jesus to them. I am grateful to the leadership of Hudson River Presbytery for honoring my request to speak here today, and to God for changing my heart. I am so sorry....I feel ashamed for taking so long to come to see what **now** seems to be so self-evident to me....please forgive me.