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Pastor who brought suit that defined PC(USA)'s distinction between marriage and holy unions, repents of his position and seeks forgiveness

Scarborough, NY – “I am here to ask for forgiveness from the 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,” begins a statement by the Rev. Marc Benton. “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,” writes Benton, who will join in conversation with members of the Hudson River Presbytery at their September 23rd meeting.

“We are beginning with Marc a journey of forgiveness involving remembrance, honesty, understanding and, wherever possible, healing,” said the Rev. Dr. Susan Andrews, General Presbyter. “When Marc reached out this summer to let us know he had a change of heart and mind and wished to apologize, we sensed the Spirit making a way forward.”

Benton, a member of the Hudson River Presbytery, is currently teaching at York College and Harrisburg Area Community College in Pennsylvania. In his personal and reflective statement he articulates how and why he came to change his position. Through numerous conversations with people who are lesbian and gay he came to understand “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” and was “devastated” by the hardship they faced of living in a culture where “there are still many people who are prejudiced against homosexuality.” As he carefully read and re-read Scripture, Benton came to believe that people who are lesbian and gay were being unfairly targeted for censure by the evangelical church. “And so it became a question for me of basic fairness.”

Benton expresses gratitude to God for changing his heart. “And so here I am, some 15 years later, to apologize for what I did back then,” he writes, “...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.”

At the request of Benton, the presbytery first sent his statement to presbytery members and now is releasing it to the wider church. “Marc is joining our regular presbytery gathering in September because it was important both to Hudson River

Presbytery and to Marc that there be time for members to reflect upon his apology and then to meet together face-to-face,” explained Andrews.

When the Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly ruled on Benton v. Hudson River Presbytery, it made a “determinative distinction” between a permissible same-sex ceremony and a marriage ceremony. The PJC ruled that ministers (and sessions, if church property were used) could exercise judgment over whether union ceremonies between couples of the same sex could be performed, but “ministers and sessions should take special care to avoid any confusion of such services with services of Christian marriage.”¹

Benton’s change of heart and mind comes at a pivotal moment in the PC(USA). This June, the 221st General Assembly voted to pass an authoritative interpretation that immediately allows for pastors to perform “any such marriage as they believe the Holy Spirit calls them to perform” where legal by state law, including same-sex marriages. And the 221st GA also approved a recommendation to change language in the Book of Order to indicate that “marriage involves a unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman.” That recommendation is before presbyteries for a vote. Hudson River Presbytery, which concurred with an overture in support of this step, will be voting on this amendment later this year.

In the hope that his statement will benefit others, Benton requested that the Hudson River Presbytery share his statement widely.

“In each of our lives there have been times when we have seriously revised positions we once held,” said Andrews. “When we take the next step, to consider how actions we have taken as a result of our former beliefs have hurt others, to listen and take account, and to begin the process of repairing what we can, new life becomes possible for us, for others, and for the church.” ##END##

¹ The Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Decision, Marc G. Benton, et al., v. Presbytery of Hudson River, Remedial Case 212-11, 22 May 2000, p. 6.