



Jim Vespa, Rochester, NY
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May I share an example of what it can mean to a gay person to be surrounded by a loving, supportive Presbyterian church during one of life's most awful periods?

I moved to Rochester from Indianapolis in November 1991 to be with my partner, Michael Thomas. We knew that he was HIV-positive but we decided to spend our lives together and looked forward to as many years with each other as we might have.

After visiting several different churches in Rochester, a friend suggested that I try Downtown United Presbyterian Church (DUPC). It was liturgically very different from the Episcopal church in Indianapolis that I had been active in, but the ministers, the people, and the spirit of DUPC captured me: I soon became a member.

Michael's health was good for several years but then went from bad to OK to terrible. During periods of his hospitalization or when he was on the mend at home, we were visited by clergy, friends, and TAMFS evangelist, Janie Spahr. The image of Janie and our dear friend Ginny Davidson sitting next to Michael during a particularly bad period is still vivid in my mind.

In October 1997, Michael left us. His funeral, held at DUPC on a warm, bright autumn day, was a celebration of his life. There were no secrets; there were no worries that something would leak out. The several hundred people who came cried, laughed, and held each other close. During the service we heard a reading of Micah 6:8 on what God requires of us: "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with [y]our God." Because of DUPC, my church home, in the absolute darkest moment of my life I felt God's grace in a way that I had never before and have not since.

Being supported, loved, and spiritually nourished as I have been by my faith community in Rochester, NY is, I realize, very different from what most LGBTQ people experienced in Presbyterian churches across the country. My brothers and sisters have been humiliated, isolated, and made to feel ashamed and unloved by *our* Creator resulting in their abandoning the church, its traditions, and its sacraments. My experience is what *should* have been the norm; it should not have been a rarity.

The attitude of the PCUSA and many of its local congregations and members towards LGBTQ people, their families, and friends seems to be more open and welcoming than it was even ten years ago. But as I think of what most LGBTQ people and their families experienced, many are still scarred. They cannot forget how the PCUSA as a whole and

many individuals who called themselves followers of Christ failed in one of the most basic teachings: to love one's neighbor as oneself.

Hearing from the PCUSA that it now realizes that it fell far short of that commandment would be an important step in reconciliation. It would be a way to begin to rewrite the words of a well-known hymn to read: "In Christ there is no north or south, in Christ no straight or gay."

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