

Rock Stars and Prophets: Generations of Justice and Love Interview Series
A Ministry of That All May Freely Serve

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Ted: My name is Ted Coppock. I'm from Westminster Church in the Presbytery of Des Moines, and I live in West Des Moines, Iowa.

I got involve with More Light, Covenant Network and That All may Freely Serve about 15 years ago when I was at a presbytery meeting, and Rev. Mike Smith from Grunnell and his wife Sylvia were part of More Light Presbyterians. And, Mike and I had worked together on presenting overtures and change to the presbytery, and he was retiring, moving to Tucson, Arizona. And at the last presbytery meeting we worked together, he walked up to me and said, "It's all yours, baby!" And, so, from that point on I was the point person in our presbytery, relative to topics of justice for all people. So, that's how I got started.

Warren: Give some reflections, over time, from that chair. Just a narrative of your reflections of what was happening and what you had to encounter...

Ted: What was happening in our presbytery, which has always voted in favor of almost every one of the inclusivity overtures and authoritative interpretations was that through Mike's work in bringing those items for approval -- as I took over I really was fortunate to not have to start from Ground Zero. And, I, with Mike's help and Sylvia, I communicated regularly, personally with them and still do, I just finished a conversation with Sylvia on the text message. In any case, what was going on was that -- I had a daughter, who was married in our church and ultimately divorced and developed a relationship with a same gender person, so this became -- not because of her -- but it made my wife and I more aware of the fact that -- that we had everything over in the closet somewhere, pardon the pun, and we didn't have to deal with it until our daughter came out to us twenty-five years ago. And, so, when Mike asked me to do the work, with our presbytery, primarily -- it was kind of exciting for me, because it gave me something -- there was a reason why I was doing it -- because my daughter was baptized in our church and the usual traditional vows of the parents and the congregation to assist that child in their faith journey in the future.

At the same time all this was happening, I was elected an Elder in the church, and they gave me a Book of Order, which I read – a lot of people don't – and I got to G-6.0106b and found out that if my daughter wanted to be involved in the governance of the church that she would have a tough time doing it based on that information. And, so, I decided that what Mike asked me to do needed to be an important part of my future, personally.

So, that was really what was going on with our presbytery. Our presbytery always had vigorously argued the pros and cons of making changes, but they always voted on the issues that were presented in favor of them by about a 60%+ margin. So, it's not that I was handed a piece of cake that was very flavorful and easy to deal with, but it remained that way over time.

But, I had to be prepared to do a little different type of approach when people from the presbytery, members, presented arguments against doing what I was bringing to them. And, so, I enjoyed doing that. I enjoyed it - looking at the Bible and what it says, and the background of information, before and after the passages that are always used to talk about discrimination. It was interesting to me to be encouraged to do more than just look at six verses in the Bible.

That was my journey.

As, we moved forward, I became more and more involved with the organizations, such as More Light Presbyterians and Covenant Network and That All May Freely Serve. And, our church began an inclusivity group, called the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Affirmation Group. We're authorized as a small group to support ourselves and bring ideas to the church: educational, informational – I'm co-chair of that group and have been for years. Every person in this meeting, from the start of this movement to currently has been at our church doing workshops for the entire faith community in Des Moines, not our church. So, it's very interesting: when we had Chris Glaser and we had Janie Spahr, we anticipated inviting people by various methods, and we thought, "Well, wow, if we have a crowd of thirty people for this workshop it's gonna be really good!" Well, both of those two individuals – we had excess of a hundred people from fourteen faith traditions, and it was just marvelous.

We also had Jack Rogers, after he found his journey to be different than it was at first, when he was definitively not in favor of the things that have happened over the last few years. And, he completely changed around. And we had him come for a workshop, also.

So, that's kind of what's happened from then to now.

I was fortunate to be very involved in the marriage amendment that just has successfully gained enough votes to become polity and the authoritative

interpretation. And the little humble State of Iowa that raises corn and pigs, we were the third state to have marriage equality. And, so the authoritative interpretation allowed pastors and churches to host same gender weddings, not just civil ceremonies. And, that allowed them to do that *if they so choose*, and they interviewed a couple that was meant to be married and not just there for the show. They could host those without being called before the Judicial Commission of the Presbyterian Church. And, that was a big step that became effective June 21st of last year (2014), because it was not something that had to be voted on by 173 presbyteries and have a majority. It became effective immediately.

The interesting thing to me is: I've been on both sides of issues in the Iowa Legislature, also. And, our teams of people have been very successful there in adding sexual orientation and gender identity to the Civil Rights Code and the State Board of Education Bullying Bill. And back in '07, they became law. And we recently were able to get the Legislature to decriminalize AIDS cases that came to the court, where before, regardless of the severity of the AIDS case, if someone was found guilty it was an automatic 25 year sentence, regardless of the circumstances. And, we got changed, so it could be adjudicated based on the same basis and the penalty, if any, could be based on the circumstances of each case, as opposed to just automatic 25 years.

Warren: What year was that?

Ted: That happened this spring. This year.

Warren: So, that law is still....

Ted: The law that was 25 years mandatory is no longer on the books, because we succeeded in – they called it decriminalization....

Warren: So what year did that, I was looking...

Ted: That happened this year...

Warren: So, the decriminalization just happened this year?

Ted: Yes: Now, we've been working on it for a long time...

Warren: So, that law was on the books until that moment that you're speaking of...

Ted: Yes.

Warren: That's wonderful....

Ted: And, so several of the notable people relative to this type of meeting we've had over that years that came and spoke about AIDS, some of them came and testified in the Iowa Legislature. And, it was very effective. We have a statewide organization for all inclusivity, not just gender and sex, that's called "One Iowa." And, its' now one of the largest organizations in the United States that is advocates for equality for all people, and it was the same group of 20-25 people that we started with back... and we formed that organization so we could have better organization; have some funding to do some important things; and formed a 501(c)3 rather than just a bunch of individuals rockin' - walkin' the walk.

Warren: So, from your perspective, looking forward, what do you see in this movement and for your place as an ally.

Ted: Because of my familiarity with my particular church, which has about 1200 members, when I was a kid going there in high school we had 3500 members, but the good part of it is that our church is made up of about 40-50% of the people who that tend to be progressive, tend to be open-minded and they've learned to be that way. There's 50% of our congregation that would vote "no" on any of these issues, if they had the chance to. And, they do it for all - what they think - is the right reasons. And, so what concerns me about the future is that we, as we've gone forward in this movement and we're not done, but we've been successful in making some changes. So, now we're "in charge," in a sense and the people that have always opposed it - they're on the outside looking in. And, my concern is how do we make the church welcoming to everybody's opinion? That's the big thing for me.

Now, this particular group is comprised largely of people that want to be or are ordained Teaching Elders or Ministers of the Word and Sacrament and have had that struggle for years. But the same struggle has existed for ordinary members of the church that get suggested or nominated to be a Deacon or an Elder, which has to be an ordained position, also. I have a story related to that, if you want me to say it.

We have a - the individual I want to talk about has since passed away recently - he and his partner in their sixties have been members of our church for a long time. And, Terry, in particular, Harris, was his name, is the epitome of what you might think a Deacon in a church is. He did nothing but minister to people, call on people in hospitals, deliver meals - everything that a Deacon is charged with doing. But, he was not a Deacon, In my mind, he was a Deacon. Before the ordination standards became law in our church that it was not limited to a man and a woman living in the fidelity of the bond of marriage or chastity in singleness - I nominated Terry to be a Deacon in our church, before it was passed by the national assembly.

He went through the process with full disclosure - and everybody knew Terry - everybody in the church. Even the ones that would never vote "yes." And, we got to the congregational meeting, and a gentleman, who was more in the age of my father

if he were still living, hobbled up to the congregational microphone to question our nominations, and said, "Have you assured yourselves that every one is uniquely qualified for the position you're suggesting?" And, I nodded to Roxanne Neri next to me and said, "Say, 'Yes.'" She was the chair.

Well, we thought he was going to go sit down, but he didn't. And, he stayed at the microphone and asked for the floor and that's when I looked at Roxanne and said, "I don't know where we're going from here."

And, he said, when he got the floor, he said, "If you have assured yourself that they're all are qualified uniquely for their positions, I move that we elect them by acclamation."

I about fell off my chair. I went to talk to John afterwards and I said to him, "I'm sorry, but I just need to know where that statement came from in your thinking."

He said, "Ted, I don't agree with the direction you're going. I don't know if I ever can, but anybody that tells me that Terry Harris can't be a deacon is wrong."

So, here's a guy that was my adversary on issues that knew Terry as a person and a friend. And, he just said nobody can tell me that he can't be a Deacon, because he's a "deacon's deacon"! So, that was a story that – it took me a while to go home and just think about what happened.

But that's kind of what keeps me going.

And, after we had marriage in Iowa, I had a friend, Jay McKell, whose been on the board of Covenant Network, and he lives Overland Park, Kansas, and one of the female pastors we had, went to a church in Overland Park, Kansas. And, she called me and she said, "I have two friends that want to get married, and they want to come to Iowa to get married. Two women that were members of the church. And, would you help them find a pastor and a place to have the marriage?"

So, Mary and I were the wedding coordinators. But the message that I got after it was all over is my friend Jay McKell and his wife Liz were having a congratulatory party for the two women in their home. And, Kim brought a video of the ceremony, and Jay says, "I'm sitting there and I'm looking at you and Mary involved in the management of this wedding." And, Jay's a good friend and fellow ally, and I get a message like that from someone that was a mentor to me, saying that maybe I did the right thing – it keeps me going to working towards the future.

And, so... that's kind of where I am. I've been fortunate, as I said, to work on legislative issues in Iowa and was a big part of the Supreme Court decision and the

team of lawyers and couples we took to testify, and then most recently I was more distant – but a part of – the AIDS ruling.

So, I wouldn't want this to sound "funny," but I feel good about what I've been doing.

Warren: Yes. Blessings. Blessings. Thank you so much Ted for sharing your story.

Ted. Thank you...