

Rock Stars and Prophets: Generations of Justice and Love
That All May Freely Serve
Stony Point Center, Stony Point, New York
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Mark Alan Palermo
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Chicago, Illinois & Palm Springs, California

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Mark: Looking at [Question] #1, being in the movement, I joined in 1977. I was a commissioner to General Assembly that year, and I was in the closet. And, I had the opportunity to go to the hearings on The Task Force on Homosexuality and spent three days listening to the stories of people that had been abused by the Presbyterian Church.

There was a PGC (Presbyterians for Gay Concerns) meeting at the General Assembly, and there were more coming out stories, and at that point I felt I could no longer be silent about who I was – and so I came out to Chris Glaser and then to David Sindt and got very involved in PGC – Chicago. And, worked with David for nine years until his death expanding the PGC activities and PLGC in Chicago, and we worked to put on a mid-winter conference at Lincoln Park in 1985.

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For me, now, I have not been involved in the last twenty-two years. My activity level ended in 1993, somewhat abruptly, but for those years, those sixteen years I was very much involved. Went on to do other things and work for other causes, so actually I haven't been involved for quite a while. But it's wonderful coming back to this reunion and seeing people – but also seeing the new people, and the youth and being very energized and inspired by what they have to say.

Vision for the future of the movement... I think it's necessary to tell the stories. I think the oral histories have been good, but I'm so glad we're recording what it was like, because otherwise all that's going to be lost for future generations. And, I really think that there's a lot to learn from history and knowing what the oppression was like and what coming out was like forty years ago and how different it was and how unaccepting the church was.

And to see the progress that's been made within that period of time – ordination being approved in 2011, and marriage equality being approved this year – and yet there's still so much more work to do. As someone had said today at the conference, "We've changed the polity but we haven't changed the congregations." And, that's going to take a lot of work. And we still have more people coming out and they need to be supported; we still want to increase the number of More Light congregations in the United States, and that takes a lot of work. There's a lot of educating that needs to be done, so certainly the task is by no means done.

We've sort of come through "stage one" of the first forty years, and now we need to go on to the next forty years and continue to do the work and look at some of the emerging issues. I think it's great that we have acknowledged bisexuality and transgender issues. Those are things that were not very much talked about in the early years, and now that's taking a much more central role, as it should, and looking at new ways and new perspectives of incorporating people and including people into the larger body.

This gathering was important for me, again, because I haven't been involved really in the last twenty-two years. I think that it's important for us to look at who we've been, what we've done, look at our accomplishments, look at our failures and then be somewhat of the guide both for the next generation of leadership and definitely the youth – I love their energy and their imagination and new ways of doing things, and I think there's a lot we can learn from each other in that process. So, I'm very very, much energized by this conference. I hope there will be more. This was really great. Ray took on a lot to put this on, but I really think he did a great job; very well organized; and hope that there'll be more like it.

Warren: You said you were disconnected for a number of years. What was the thing that you to come to this conference?

Mark: I think that it was just the opportunities to see the people again. Keith Hershberger was here earlier. He and I were on – did PLGC things together back in the late Seventies and early Eighties. He left in 1985, and I really sort of lost track of him – so when I found out that he was going to be here, that was one of the things that enticed me to come. And, just again, seeing people that I've not seen in so many years. The bonds were there. We were very, very close and I think just the opportunity to reminisce a little bit and to talk about where the church has been and where it's going with people that are very, very close to me – it's just a great opportunity.

Warren: So I think at the beginning we didn't get your name and where you're from...

Mark: I'm Mark Palermo, I'm from Chicago, Illinois, although now I spend my winters in Palm Springs, California. I've been on the Executive Board of PLGC (Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns) from 1986-1992, and with Mitzi Henderson and Jean McKenzie, I was one of the co-founders of the More Light Churches Network. We were asked to put together a structure, a framework, and officers for More Light Churches Network, which was founded in 1992, and which operated for seven years, until it merged back with PLGC in 1999 to become More Light Presbyterians.

The focus of the More Light Churches Network was very different from the PLGC. PLGC was working with individuals who were coming out and providing resources for them, and with the More Light Churches, we had been meeting in conferences since 1985. And the issues were different, because we were looking at how do we become a resource and support for congregations who may be under judicial attack for ordaining elders and deacons and how to deal with Permanent Judicial Commissions and that sort of thing. So, we looked at those issues, and we felt that an organization, somewhat separate from PLGC, would be a good way to address that.

Warren: Thank you.

Mark: OK, you're welcome...