

University Presbyterian Church (UPC) and More Light

Early History: Students and Civil Rights, UPC's Founding.

Our present sanctuary was built in 1952 as "Westminster Chapel" a center for Presbyterian Students students at The University of Alabama. In the '60's when African American Students from Stillman College were attempting to worship at many of the churches in town, they were turned away wherever they went. When they came to Westminster Chapel (now UPC) the Campus Minister, Ed Payne Miller, saw to it that they were seated. Of course there were repercussions from that and eventually he had to leave. The next campus minister, Bob Keever, became UPC's founding pastor. A group of people who wanted all races to be able to worship together gathered along with the students to found the church in 1966 – 40 years ago. UPC has continued to be committed to both campus ministry and to inclusiveness.

I came to UPC in August of '97. During the call process, as we discussed the future of UPC, I told the committee that I would like to help them "live into their history" and find out where it would lead us today. They wanted to do that.

One event leading up to our becoming a "More Light Congregation" was the hate crime when Billy Jack Gaither a gay man, was brutally murdered in Sylacauga, AL. I spoke at a Memorial Service for him in Birmingham and two of the people who were there began coming to UPC after they found out about me. They are Annabel Stephens and Pat Dunbar – they had been together for 20 years. Recently they were married in Canada. Annabel is an Elder and Pat is a Deacon at UPC. Their presence and leadership in the life and work of our church helped justice and full inclusiveness for gays and lesbians "come alive" as a major part of our mission at UPC.

Then we had a wonderful experience when a panel from More Light and TAMFS came and spent the weekend with us on one of the "Southern Road Trips." It was Michael, Jim Rigby, Marty Rightmeyer and Helene Loper – I think that was all. Our people were moved by the stories of the panel members. Jim Rigby preached. We began a discernment process, studying the bible and discussing our mission in relation to "More Light."

One major factor in our discernment process was that campus ministry continued to be a major part of our mission. We did not have adequate facilities for campus ministry and we had begun a major fund drive, asking churches throughout the state to help us build the student center. We had also applied for the Presbyterian Women's Birthday Offering, but felt that our receiving it was a long shot. Almost all of our members felt that becoming a More Light Church was the right thing to do. GLBT persons in Alabama were hurting so much. Many young adult Christians were taught by their churches that they were "an abomination to God" and sadly they believed it. Of course there was a great deal of depression among young adult gays and lesbians.

The thing that worried us about affiliating with “More Light” was that possibly we would not succeed in getting the funding to build the Student Center when churches in Alabama heard of our decision. At the last of our discernment meetings, some members cried, because they were committed to doing what was right, but thought it would mean we would lose our student ministry.

In December of 2000, the Session voted overwhelmingly in favor of becoming a More Light Congregation. Only 10 days after that vote, we received a letter from Presbyterian (USA) Women saying that we had been selected to receive the Birthday Offering of \$205,000! We now knew that we could build the Center and also do ministry with GLBT persons. In February, 2002, our wonderful new student center was dedicated which greatly helped our ministry with to Presbyterian students through the state

On April 8, 2001, Michael Adee preached, we had the Shower of Stoles at UPC and we celebrated becoming a “More Light Congregation.” The invitation read, “Please join University Presbyterian Church as we celebrate God’s gift of more light, our recommitment to the full inclusion of gays and lesbians in the church, and our recent affiliation with More Light Presbyterians.” There was a major article in the Tuscaloosa News about us.

After that the numbers of gay and lesbians members grew; and as far as we know no one left the church because of our More Light decision. The University Counseling Center began referring people to me who were in churches who taught that God condemned them for their sexuality. We got more younger gay and lesbian members and formed a “GLBT and Friends” group several years ago. This group has served as a wonderful support community. For a time if you googled “gay church Alabama” our church name would come up first. I guess that is still the case. There is information and photos on our website about the GLBT group. (uaupc.org) There is a group photo there that you might want to use in the article.

Over two years ago, I got an instant message late one a Saturday night from someone who said, “I’m transsexual and I want to join your church.” I met with her. She needed some pastoral support at the time and wasn’t quite ready to begin coming to UPC. Several of our members offered her support. We did education with the session about transgender issues. She joined the church and became an important part of our congregation.

One of my major concerns up until about a year and a half ago was that the students from Westminster Fellowship student group had all come from rather traditional churches in Alabama and were not especially interested in learning more about inclusiveness and justice for GLBT persons. They accepted the fact that it was an important part of UPC’s ministry, but were not involved with it. I was patient with them, listening, trying not to push, but it was painful for me. I loved our Westminster Fellowship students and I loved our GLBT group – *and*

they were two very separate entities. A little over a year ago Michael Adee visited us again. He preached at UPC, and of course met with and spoke with our GLBT group. Many members of this group were undergraduate or graduate students. The Leadership Team of the Westminster Fellowship (the Presbyterian students) was reluctant to invite Michael to meet with their group. They agreed to invite him if we would get someone to represent “the other side” to speak at another time. This was difficult for me. I called our Presbytery Executive, Terry Newland, who is a very fair person and discussed with him who would be good for me to ask to speak to the group. In the course of the conversation, he said, he would come and discuss the history of the PCUSA in light of GLBT issues with the group. (But this would not be presenting “the other side” of the issue from Michael Adee. The students were happy with that and it turned out to be a great program. When Michael spoke to the Westminster Fellowship, the students loved his presentation. Two students from the GLBT group came to the supper following Michael’s presentation. The Westminster Fellowship students were very warm and welcoming to them, because they had been moved by Michael’s talk. While they might not have been able to hear it from me – they heard what Michael had to say. Some of the GLBT students began coming regularly to the Westminster Fellowship. One of them became a member of the Westminster Fellowship Leadership Team. Close friendships developed, minds and hearts were opened. I have been very moved by this.

One other aspect that I want to mention is our work with West Alabama Aids Outreach (WAAO). One of our members and I have been WAAO Board Members and have been deeply involved with their work. In the process we have gotten to know many of the clients. A number of them began worshipping with us. They are open about their HIV status with the congregation. Our church planted a tree in the front yard with a plaque “In honor of those living with AIDS and in Memory of those who have died.” Five members of our congregation are living with HIV/AIDS and are open about this in the congregation.

Celebrations: We had a reception for Pat and Annabel when they came back from Canada where they were married. Recently Jamie and Jeff were married in Canada and we are having a major celebration of their marriage in June.

Who would have believed this would have happened at a 75 member Presbyterian Church in Tuscaloosa, Alabama? Only with God can these things happen. I moved here after living in California for 20 years, but God has given me more opportunity to minister in justice/love in Alabama than I could have dreamed.

I will be retiring on July 1 after 25 years as an ordained Presbyterian minister. This will be only two weeks after UPC is honored at the More Light Banquet. (On April 2, I will be telling the session that I am retiring and it will be public after that.) I cannot think of a more wonderful closure for my ministry than the fact of our church being honored in this way.

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