

The Policy of Inclusion of Gay and Lesbian Persons In Mt. Auburn Presbyterian Church

*(Delivered by Hal Porter on the 20th Anniversary of the Policy,
Sunday, August 14, 2011)*

William Sloan Coffin, one of the most respected ministers of our era, and who once graced this pulpit, said honestly, but sadly, that homosexuality is “the most divisive issue” for the church “since slavery split the church.”

When Mt Auburn Church faced this issue in 1991, and did so as fully as any Presbyterian congregation I know by totally rejecting the then dominant cultural and religious view that homosexual persons were of sub-human worth, not equally made in the image of God, it seemed a natural and uncomplicated step for it to take. Already this congregation had re-decided that we are here to worship and serve God’s unbounded love for this world and all who dwell in it. We needed to serve God in this world with justice and compassion, just as did Jesus.

That is why we early on do a very basic thing by examining our expansive buildings to make sure that they reflected Jesus’ welcome and ministry. The Session led us in a building campaign called, “That All May Freely Enter”, which not only connected our several scattered buildings but made our sanctuary, which was difficult not only to find and to enter, a much more

welcoming and accessible place for all people. That is also why we permitted other social agencies that sought the betterment of humanity to be housed in some of our unused spaces and gave permission to other groups to hold meetings whose voices needed to be heard but lack a venue to do so.

Then, the church, led again by the Session, looked at the way we worshipped and established another theological campaign entitled, “A Table Set for All”. The chancel was rearranged, the wall dividing the choir and congregation removed, and the communion table was placed at the center of our sanctuary, all to remind everyone who came to worship that Jesus was the host at that table and they, no matter who they were, were invited by him to his bread and his wine. The Session sent an overture to the Presbytery indicating Mt Auburn was practicing open communion feeling it should be normative in all our churches for then we would be simply practicing the gracious table manners of Jesus who dined with all: the rich and the poor, the righteous and the down trodden, the just and the unjust.

Still, it became increasingly evident that our welcome was not complete. After all, what was conflicting the church, as well as the world, was homosexuality and that reality could no longer be hushed up or should it be.

In 1978 the General Assembly, our national ruling body, received our denomination’s first serious study of

homosexuality and the report was positive that gay and lesbians persons be fully accepted in the life of the Presbyterian Church. Unfortunately, the General Assembly rejected the report and instead concluded that homosexuality was not God's intention for humanity, that homosexual behavior in and of its self was sinful, and that while we welcomed them in the church those who practiced their sexual identity could not be ordained as elders, deacons, or pastors. It was a tragic and unChrist like decision.

Sadly, this defamation of gay and lesbian members continued for the next thirteen years until in 1991 the General Assembly received its second major study regarding homosexuality and the church. It, too, recommended the full acceptance of homosexual persons in the life of the church. It seemed that every time we took time to study it, those actually involved in the study, got it right. But this time the Assemble simply refused to approve it! Their only recommendation was that the churches could study this document along with contrary views – but there would be no change in the church's position on homosexuality. Homosexual behavior in and of itself remained sinful.

One could sense the deep disappointment here at Mt Auburn. Typical of that feeling was a letter member Ray Matlock sent to The Cincinnati Enquirer objecting to an editorial that supported the decision of the Assembly not to approve the report. The editor thought those who

wrote the report were simply an extreme element in the Presbyterian Church. Ray wrote in part, “As an ordained Elder of the Presbyterian Church, I object to your ill-informed and narrow editorial...I am proud of a church which chooses to deliberate, question and debate the serious issues of contemporary life, including issues of sexual standards...I am proud of attempts, even though they are rejected, to break the barriers to full church participation by homosexuals and to end hypocrisy regarding sexual standards.

In the Presbyterian Church, he added, the only credential is faith; the only motive should be love, The (so called) extremists who drafted the report were, I am sure,

less radical than the one who broke bread with prostitutes and lepers, loved the outcasts and the lowly, and would, if he were here today, embrace even editorial writers.”

The Session and congregation’s response was to do what the General Assembly suggested, and studied the issue. They then set up a task force to bring in a recommendation. The only difficulty the committee had was getting the wording just right, and finally they asked Elder Nancy Brock, who was herself a wonderful legal aid attorney in our city, to write a final summary. We met and she read it to us. We were all deeply moved, some to tears, and we accepted it word for

glorious word. It was approved by Session a week before Christmas with only one negative vote, but it would be approved yearly these past 20 years unanimously.

The words of the policy are just and compassionate. (It can found on Mt Auburn's web site.) But what this policy further declared was that Mt Auburn Church would not abide by any policy or doctrine in our denomination that abuses or demeans gay and lesbian persons or treats them as less than heterosexual persons. We are all equally made in God's image. And through these long, complicated, difficult, and maturing years since we declared it, I believe this church has served it without compromise, up to this day.

Upon its adoption, surprisingly to most of us, wonderful things began to happen to our congregation. At the time of its adoption none of us knew of a gay or lesbian person in our congregation. We were wrong about that, but soon there would be. In the first six years of the policy, 223 new members joined the church, and a third were gay. How often would I hear someone come into my office and say, "I never thought I had a place in the church, nor have I thought I ever would seek membership, but here I am."

And then there were the wonderful talents that came forth enriching all of our lives. Soon new elders and deacons, who were openly gay, were ordained. Michael

Adee, being the first. Speak of the Gay Nineties, it was literally true here with gay and lesbians coming to celebrate their marital unions, their children to be baptized, and everyone, gay and straight, hugging one another, all fully engaged in the joyous reality of the grace of God and the freedom that brings to one's soul.

Certainly, because of the inclusion policy, we all began to experience a depth of the Gospel that we had never known before, gay and straight together.

And not only did our inclusion policy lead us to confront homophobia in the church but also in our city. Cincinnati, unlike any other city in the country, had voted in a city wide election to change its city charter, Article XII, stating that homosexual persons' sexual identity had no protective status in our city. Mt Auburn, more than any other church fought hard against it, and, after more than a decade of struggle, had it repealed. Mt Auburn also took a lead in finally including gay and lesbian persons in the city's human rights ordinance.

The Presbytery of Cincinnati, however, the body we are directly responsible to, had a different reaction to our policy. They voted 162 to 75 against it, ruling our policy to be erroneous and determined our church to be irregular. The Presbytery ordered us to prayerfully reconsider it and change it. The Session prayerfully reconsidered it and unanimously reaffirmed it! I confess that the congregation took some pride that they were

indeed irregular. The Presbytery, of course, was not satisfied with our response and would, over the years, approve two separate Administrative Commissions to get Mt Auburn to change its position, but both Commissions, after thoroughly scrutinizing our ministry, would eventually fail. Gratefully, and at long last, it would instead be the Presbyterian Church that would be the one changing its position, and that largely occurred just a month ago. That is one of the reasons we have Michael Adee here to speak to us this day for no one has worked harder than he to bring about this just and compassionate change that has now occurred in our denominational home. He will explain more.

Let me end this very simple over-view with this personal note. So many of you have contributed so much to make Mt Auburn's inclusion policy a reality. Thank you dear Mt Auburn. All of you. But what has kept me going over these many years, keeping me within the Presbyterian Church when it would have been tempting to move beyond it, has been our gay members; their faith primarily, but especially their courage in the face of such relentless abuse, especially hurtful when it came from their own beloved church. Yet they knew the gospel and they held on fast to Jesus. They knew that God's love could redeem homophobia and make the church a more beloved community, and bring the world to a new level of equity and freedom. They are the ones we especially

should be thanking today and we do, from the bottom of our hearts.