



Pilgrims Together

by

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In an earlier issue of *The Spire*, I observed that God has gathered the members of our Haworth church family from many different religious backgrounds. This diversity presents us with some challenges but also with a unique opportunity for us all to deepen our own faith through the process of expressing and sharing our different understandings and experiences.

Throughout the history of Christianity, churches have enforced conformity and discouraged diversity. They deliberately ostracized individuals who could not accept unquestioningly the church's officially approved doctrines and practices including the church's stance on the authority and interpretation of Scripture. Traditionally, religious instruction shunned dialog and relied on memorizing and internalizing questions and answers from a standardized catechism book that distilled the most complex of theological answers to simple statements. Over the centuries, millions of Catholics memorized their Dutch and Baltimore Catechisms while millions of Protestants memorized their Geneva and Westminster Catechisms. Catechisms had the advantage of creating a shared understanding among a group of "what we all believe" while leaving no "gray area" for doubt, dialog, or diversity.

As we began to explore what it means for a congregation to declare itself to be "open and affirming," we quickly came face to face with our diversity in a way that no other issue has raised. We had barely begun the discussion of our perspective on gays and lesbians when the specific questions were overshadowed by the larger questions of what we believed about the authority, inspiration, interpretation, and application of Scripture.

In many churches there is a single perspective on Scripture that is shared by everyone and even enforced by church authority. Who can read it? Who can interpret it? What are "correct" interpretations? What are incorrect interpretations? How do we view the authority of Scripture? How do we understand the authorship and inspiration of Scripture? What do we accept about the validity of Scripture in guiding us in our understanding of God and our relationships with other people? What do we accept about the guidance of Scripture in our understanding of history and science? How do we interpret Scripture when we feel we encounter seeming contradictions or inconsistencies? How do we regard specific, troubling instructions of Scripture? How do we apply the insights of ancient Scripture to the moral, spiritual, and ethical challenges of living in modern society? We all agree that neither God nor human nature has changed since Biblical times. How do we receive scriptural truths that are expressed using images and language that seem to sometimes clash with our modern understanding of botany, geology, genetics, psychology, or cosmology.

Reflecting our profound respect for individual conscience and our deep belief that "God is still speaking," the United Church of Christ embraces a range of approaches to Scripture while affirming the role of Scripture as the foundation for our worship, our faith, and our understanding about God. As the ONA discussion expanded into a broader examination of our views on Scripture and biblical authority, we came face-to-face with both the blessings and challenges inherent in our diversity. It highlighted the need for us to see how each

of us has accumulated a set of understandings about God, morality, Scripture, the Bible, the church, right and wrong, and individual conscience. Few of us have had to articulate what we do or do not believe about the Bible. We have never had to express to other people either our honest doubts or our most sincerely held beliefs. And for the vast majority of us, we have never tried to articulate what we believe to individuals who may not share exactly the same beliefs and assumptions.

If we were jarred by the discovery that the people sitting on either side of us may hold some different views on matters of faith, we were also strongly and warmly affirmed as well when we also discovered that *what we share as a genuinely caring and loving Christian family far outweighed our differences*. We have been able to celebrate that — by the grace of God — we have had our individual faith journeys converge in the same church, at the same time. Together.

Only God knows where the ONA exploration process will lead the First Congregational United Church of Christ of Haworth. Will we be led to stand united in our commitment to be Open and Affirming or will we be led to table any decision around which we cannot agree in love and harmony?

What I do know — and know with all my heart — is that the process of considering ONA has already opened our eyes to a fuller encounter with Scripture than we have ever had before. I know that the process has already taught us priceless lessons about valuing and respecting each other. It has already begun to challenge us to give voice to feelings and doubts that some of us have never felt comfortable voicing in church before. And I know that all of these things are good. All of these things are the signs of a church that is growing spiritually, growing in the breadth and depth of our understanding and respect for Scripture, growing in respect for our differences, and growing in respect for each other. These are the signs of a church that is sincerely trying to shed the light of their faith on complex and nuanced real-world decisions.

Since the earliest days of the church, people of good will and deep faith have wrestled with the same important questions that we are raising today. It has never been easy. However, I know absolutely that when we can open up our hearts to listen to other views that is the time when our faith has a chance to stretch and to grow. By gathering with other members of our church family to share our beliefs and our doubts, we grow closer to God and closer to our companions on our shared faith journey.

Pastor Doug