

DES MOINES, WASHINGTON, Feb. 23--Bishop Jack M. Tuell, once an opponent of full ministry with homosexual persons in The United Methodist Church, now says, "I was wrong."

"Doing a New Thing: The United Methodist Church and Homosexuality"

A sermon by Bishop Jack M. Tuell, Des Moines, Washington. Preached Sunday, February 20, 2000, at the Des Moines United Methodist Church, Des Moines, Washington

Text: "I am about to do a new thing." --Isaiah 43:19

Religion has never been known as a force at the cutting edge of doing new things. Avant garde has not been a phrase used to describe the church throughout history. Rather, the church is usually perceived as a conserving force, seeking to retain the traditional values that have come from the past. This is shown in the respect and honor we give the Holy Bible, a document written several millennia ago. It is seen in the ancient customs of Orthodox Christians, from time-honored liturgies to the unchanging clerical vestments of its clergy. Islam thrives on ancient practices such as daily prayers of its people, as five times each day they face toward Mecca. Thousand-year-old statues of the Buddha remain powerful symbols for Buddhists. In Christianity, ancient creeds are recited from week to week in churches around the world.

All of this is good--there is truth and value at the center of religious faith which is unchanging and ought to be honored and revered. John Wesley recognized this in placing tradition as one of four guidelines for us, along with scripture, experience and reason. But our scripture lesson for today reminds us that God is ever ready to do a new thing. It further reminds us that the God we worship is not a static God, capable only of speaking to us from two, three or four thousand years ago. Rather, God is living, alive in this moment, revealing new truth to us here, now, in this year of our Lord 2000.

God is revealing new truth in many areas of life. One which is increasingly clear is that He is speaking to us in the issue of homosexuality. I am aware that many people are uncomfortable even mentioning this matter and wish it would just go away. I am aware of that, because I have felt exactly the same way. I am also aware that it is not the most important issue The United Methodist Church faces. The most important issue is to make disciples, to share the love of God in a world that is hurting. But homosexuality is the most volatile and potentially divisive issue we face, and I believe that God is about to do a new thing among us. The new thing that God is doing in our midst right now is to show us that homosexuality is not simply an act or acts of willful disobedience to God's law and commandments, but it is a state of being. It is an identity that God has given to some of His children. It is who they are.

How does this assertion--this new thing--stand up against John Wesley's

Four tests of Christian truth: scripture, tradition, experience and reason?

SCRIPTURE: Twice in the Book of Leviticus and once in the Book of Romans are condemnations of homosexual activity. One in Leviticus indicates that death is the penalty for such acts. In truth, there are instances of homosexual acts which should be condemned, even as there are instances of heterosexual acts which should be condemned. I do not doubt that the writer of Leviticus and that St. Paul had good reason to write as they did. But when we turn to the scripture, we need to turn to the whole of the scripture. When we do that, the central and over-whelming message is God's inclusive love for all of humankind. Scholars of all opinions have agreed that one verse of scripture is truly the "gospel

in a nutshell"-- the beloved John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life (NRSV)."

The overwhelming love of God in Christ sweeps some specific prohibitions away, even though they are in the Bible. Do you believe that? Anyone here divorced? Jesus ruled out almost all divorce. Anyone here a woman? Well, Paul didn't rule you out, but he ruled you out of speaking in church. Anybody here eat pork? Specifically prohibited! Look, the sovereign message of the Bible is God's redeeming, all-powerful love that overrides all else, and places specific prohibitions in the context of the time and place and situation in which they were written.

TRADITION: We remember Tevya in *Fiddler on the Roof* singing, "Tradition." Regarding homosexuality, it is not so much that tradition has been actively against it, but that tradition has been actively covering it up. The tradition is that it is a taboo subject--shrouded in mystery--unspeakable--unmentionable--a subject to be crammed down into the nether regions of our consciousness and forgotten. As a consequence, our real tradition is ignorance. So to that extent, church tradition doesn't help much. In another way, however, we have a long tradition of change. Some 150 years ago, in many of our churches, Methodists believed slavery was scriptural and ordained by God. Until 1920, The Methodist Church in its Discipline prohibited (or tried to prohibit) "dancing, theater-going, and card-playing." But we have a long, long tradition of finally sorting out what is truly important over what is either incorrect or only marginally important. In the long run, we have always been able to discern when God is doing a new thing in our midst. This capacity to change is among the noblest of our traditions.

EXPERIENCE: Of all the 4 tests of Christian truth, experience is in some ways the deepest and most far-reaching. It is the thing that can move us when nothing else can. John Wesley was an academic, legalistic, guilt-ridden and slightly repulsive Anglican priest before he experienced the love of God in his heart of hearts--before his heart, as he wrote, was "strangely warmed." It turned his life around. It made the difference between his ending up a forgotten cleric of the Church of England and what he is--a man remembered, respected and followed by millions, one of the great spiritual fathers of the human race. What is the role of experience in the issue we speak of today? It is the personal encounter with the anguish, the pain, the hurt, the suffering, the despair which harsh and judgmental attitudes can have on persons of homosexual orientation. How does this encounter come about? One way is when parents realize that their child is a person of homosexual orientation. They share intensely and intimately in the struggle, perhaps the denial, often the anguish, but ultimately the acceptance of the child whom they bore and whom they love. It is little wonder that such parents gather together with others in groups such as PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) to bring about understanding and change. For they have experienced first-hand some of the deep, deep hurt that accompanies this issue in our church and in our society. In my own case, based on my limited understanding, I went along with the prevailing view, although never including any hatred. I said to myself, "After all, God created men and women different, complementary to one another physically and perhaps emotionally. From my viewpoint as a heterosexual person, hetero-sexuality must be what God expects of all His creation." It was just common sense to me. I was wrong. It was experience that showed me I was wrong. Actually, several experiences were at work.

A year ago, when Bishop Joseph Sprague of Illinois asked me to come and preside over a church trial, experience made its compelling points with me. The Reverend Gregory Dell was pastor of the Broadway United Methodist Church in Chicago, a congregation made up of about 40% gay and lesbian persons,

situated in a community of similar makeup. Under the law of our denomination, Reverend Dell was charged with "disobedience to the order and discipline of The United Methodist Church," for conducting a service of holy union for two members of his congregation, two gay men. These two men were active in their church as ushers, finance committee members, and regular participants. They had been living as partners for several years, but had been having trouble in their relationship. They came seeking spiritual counsel from their pastor, and wanted to have some kind of service of prayer or blessing of their commitment. They felt it would strengthen them and make them better partners. Reverend Dell agreed to conduct a small, informal service, which took place in September of 1998. The facts of the case were never contested. For conducting this service, the trial court found him guilty and suspended him from the exercise of ministry. Ecclesiastically speaking, the decision was correct. As I understand the Spirit of God, it was wrong.

For two long days I watched this trial of a dedicated, energetic, compassionate, caring and able minister, with 30 years of loyal service to our church. This experience, along with other experiences I am sure, caused me to change my mind. I began to see the new thing God is doing.

REASON: Reason cuts both ways. For a long time, reason told me that God's creation of male and female ruled out anything but hetero-sexuality. But reason, enriched by experience, actually told me otherwise. I have often taken issue with arguments which equated prejudice against homosexuality with prejudice against race. I took issue because race was clearly a condition one was born with, while homosexuality involved behavior which is subject to human will. Having said that, is it reasonable to believe that God would create some with an orientation toward the same gender, put within them the same strong drive of sexuality which is present in heterosexual persons, and then decree that such a drive is to be absolutely repressed and denied? This not only defies reason, but is cruel, unfeeling and arbitrary--qualities foreign to God as we know Him in Jesus Christ. Reason supports a belief that God is in the process of doing a new thing.

At the trial of Gregory Dell, the two men who were the participants in the service of union appeared as witnesses. On the stand, in response to questions, one man told about his father, a pastor in the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, one of the most conservative denominations in America. He asked his father to conduct the holy union service. The father regretfully declined, on the basis of his denomination's position, yet he attended the service. Afterwards, at the reception, the father led in a public prayer of blessing for his son and his partner. Whatever our beliefs about homosexuality, can we as Christians do any less than to affirm the committed relationships of our sisters and brothers in Christ?

In a few weeks 992 delegates will gather in Cleveland for the General Conference, marking 216 years of our church's life. These are good people, dedicated United Methodist Christians earnestly seeking God's will for our church. They have been elected by their fellow clergy and laity from all over the world and entrusted with a heavy responsibility. They will have differing perspectives on this and many issues facing them. It is impossible to predict what actions they may take, because the Spirit moves at its own pace-- "the wind bloweth where it listeth (John 3:8)." But I believe that if the delegates are listening carefully, above the competing pressures of this group and that, they will hear the still, small voice whisper, "I am doing a new thing," and they will respond faithfully.

Amen.

PROVIDING THE SERMON

"Friends of Bishop Tuell" is a small ad hoc group of local neighbors and church members, plus some national friends who appreciate his message circulate it with his permission. They include: LOCAL NEIGHBORS & CHURCH MEMBERS: Betty & Paul Beeman, Mary & Steve Boyd, Joan & Marshall Campbell, Doris-Lee Dimick, Genieve Farmer, Ed & Blythe Stanton, Ed & Betty Starr.