The enthusiastic crowd gathered at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago October 31 — November 2 for the 2013 Covenant Conference experienced thoughtful keynote addresses, inspiring preaching, nurturing fellowship, challenging workshops, and fun.

Macky Alston highlighted the importance of telling our stories by sharing his own journey growing up gay in the PC(USA), and the healing power of his own marriage. Amy Plantinga Pauw proclaimed the good news of marriage as God’s YES to creation. (See page 3.) Stacy Johnson warned that the Gospel is at stake in how the church approaches marriage equality. A variety of workshops tackled such topics as the role of ministers as agents of the state, the importance of ministry with people who are not married, resources for building an inclusive church, ministry with GLBTQ youth, and changing minds in conservative churches.

Worship services celebrated the divine purpose in marriage. (See page 6.) And a rousing Reformation Day Party featured blues by the Matthew Skollar Band and costume creativity on display.
December 1, 2013

Dear Friends,

What an incredible autumn it has been for the Covenant Network! We have just completed our Covenant Conference with the theme “Marriage Matters,” and as you can read in these pages, it was a powerful testimony to the work God is doing to bring equality to church and society and, just as importantly, it brought new depth of understanding about what marriage means for us all.

But as we announced at the conference, some of our most important work still lies ahead: The 221st General Assembly will convene June 14, 2014, in Detroit, and the Covenant Network will not be pausing even for a moment between now and then. Together with our friends at More Light Presbyterians, we are undertaking some of our most important work in our 16 years of existence to ensure that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) continues its progress toward becoming a church as generous and just as God’s grace. All the while, we continue to strive to have these conversations in ways that leave the church and all its members together and whole.

We will need every possible type of support from you, our longtime CovNet family. Can you give time at the upcoming Assembly? Can you instigate conversations in your congregations and presbyteries about matters of marriage equality? And could you expand your financial giving—even a little—to help us complete this journey? If everyone receiving this newsletter gave only $5 more, we could fund initiatives in every presbytery.

Read the newsletter. Visit our website, www.covnetpres.org. And then, I hope you will prayerfully consider using the enclosed envelope to make a generous end-of-year gift. (You can also give at the website; just click on “Donate.”) Together, we can make sure that all God’s people find a home in our church—where they can be fully included, fully served, fully loved.

God’s peace be with you,

Brian D. Ellison
Executive Director
It’s time that I give public support to my gay and lesbian sisters and brothers who believe in marriage enough that they are willing to enter into it without anything like the social approval, familial support, and financial incentives that I have mostly taken for granted in my own marriage. It’s time that I think theologically about an issue that has become a centerpiece of cultural conversation and political legislation around the world. It’s time that I acknowledge my scholarly gratitude to my queer colleagues in history, theology, and biblical studies who have already done some great work around the issues of same-sex marriage. And it’s time that I help my church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), think about marriage in a way that aligns with our ordination standards. We’re all here this weekend because it’s time that Christians gather and think this thing through.

We have a lot of company in thinking marriage through, because Christians have been doing this repeatedly from the beginning. Both theologically and practically, marriage has always been a work in progress for Christians. Marriage sits at the intersection of lots of human concerns—religious, political, economic, legal, familial. As those concerns shift, so do Christian reflections on marriage.

Our conference this weekend is continuing a Christian conversation that has been going on for a long time. Marriage has meant different things over centuries of biblical and Christian tradition, but marriage matters. It is a source of comfort, strength, and stability for individuals and families. For Christians, it is a school for learning how to love our neighbor, one way of living out our baptismal vocations to be Christ’s disciples.

I’m going to talk about marriage equality as a Reformed Christian theologian, paying special attention to the doctrine of creation. Reformed Christians have not seen marriage as a sacrament. It is not an alternative to priestly ordination. It’s not an anticipation of our eschatological union with God. Reformed Christians have often described marriage instead as a covenant. The primary referent of covenant is God’s relation to us as individuals and as a people; in a derivative way, the word covenant has also been used to describe human relationships—among other things, the bond among people who form a church community and the relation between political leaders and citizens. So it is a word used in many human social contexts, and it usually has nothing to do with gender or sexuality. The emphasis instead is on faithfulness. In God’s dealings with us, God plays for keeps, and we follow at a distance in our own earthly relationships—as church members, as parents, as trustees, and as marriage partners.

I want to linger for a little while on appeals to creation that have resulted in damaging views of marriage, because they have been so pervasive and influential in Christian tradition. I want to make clear at the outset that these views of marriage have been destructive for all people, not just LGBT folks. The movement for marriage equality is an opportunity for Christians to go back and articulate a better theology of marriage for everyone. Appeals to creation in traditional marriage theologies typically yield two principles: complementarity and fruitfulness, and these two principles reinforce each other. Understanding them in a more expansive way provides a vision of marriage that is better for everyone. The strange arithmetic of marriage, that $1 + 1 > 2$, holds true for all good marriages, both same-sex and other-sex. The complementarity of gifts and temperaments and interests of the partners in a healthy marriage continues to yield fruit for the duration of their lives together. Marriage provides a sounding board, a staging area, an anchor, that allows both people in it to venture out, to take risks, to reach out, to nurture the lives of others. Their love creates space for more love to flourish.

The push for same-gender marriage represents a desire within the LGBT community for responsibility and commitment and integration into existing institutions of society. All those who care about the flourishing of earthly human life in all its dimensions, and about the reform of the institution of marriage, should be eager to get on board.

**Amy Plantinga Pauw: “It’s Time”**

Marriage is a joyful “yes” to God’s gift of creaturely life.

**Read the full address at**

Working Toward Marriage Equality at the 221st General Assembly

The primary focus of the Covenant Network at the 221st GA will be marriage equality – since marriage is now the locus of a continued deliberate attempt to exclude some children of God from participation in the ministry of the church.

It is sometimes claimed that the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) prohibits same-gender marriage; as in many discussions of polity matters, this is an oversimplification. A minister in the PCUSA can legally do a commitment service, a holy union, a blessing of a civil union for a same-gender couple, and we believe, a religious service blessing a couple who have been married in a civil service. Our board also believes that a teaching elder may officiate at a civil marriage with a religious blessing without running afoul of the current governing interpretation of the PCUSA Constitution, provided that the officiant steers clear of traditional liturgical forms and issues a statement in connection with the service that the Presbyterian Church (USA) does not recognize what’s happening as an ecclesiastical marriage ceremony as defined by PCUSA polity.

However, some ministers in refusing to discriminate against certain families in their exercise of pastoral care have been charged with an offense for conducting legal marriages for same-gender couples; others are reluctant to subject their congregations and themselves to possible sanctions plus the distraction and expense of judicial process, and the disruption in the lives of couples who very often just want to celebrate their covenant with one another in their faith community, not to become the focus of culture wars in the church. We celebrate the growing number of U.S. states joining the equality ranks, but that does mean that more and more pastors and sessions are finding themselves in untenable positions – forced to make distinctions that offend their understanding of the gospel, or potentially to subject themselves to expensive and energy-draining judicial process.

The Covenant Network Board has joined the Board of our allied organization More Light Presbyterians in supporting a two-pronged approach to this problem at the next GA: both an authoritative interpretation of the current section of the Book of Order, W-4.9000, and an amendment that substantially revises that section.

Advice from the CovNet Board on Blessing Same-Gender Relationships:
http://covnetpres.org/2013/02/thoughts-on-officiating-at-same-gender-blessing-services/

If you are interested in the possibility of your own presbytery concurring with one or both of these overtures, please get in touch with Tricia Dykers Koenig (triciadk@covnetpres.org). The deadline for overtures that would interpret or amend the Book of Order is February 14.

Covenant Network Board Co-Moderator David Van Dyke enjoyed the Covenant Conference with his spouse, Nancy, and their daughter, Zoe.
An Authoritative Interpretation (A.I.)
is a clarification of what the language of the Book of Order means when there is confusion or disagreement. An AI can be issued by a General Assembly; or by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC). From the first applicable authoritative interpretation concerning same-gender blessings, way back in 1991: “There is no mention in the Book of Order of same sex: unions (ceremonies).” The rules that restrict the ability of pastors to minister to same-gender couples have been made by AI in the first place – it is entirely appropriate to address the pastoral crisis created by AI by issuing a different AI.

The AI being considered by a number of presbyteries would highlight the fact that marriage services are important occasions for exercising pastoral care in the context of worship, and that our Reformed tradition ensuring freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture must afford ministers the discretion to participate in legal marriage services if they believe the Holy Spirit is calling them to do so as part of their faithful ministry. The proposed AI reaffirms what is already true, including the assurance that no teaching elder can ever be required to conduct a service that violates his or her conscience or best judgment. It explicitly withdraws previous AIs on the subject beginning with the 1991 statement and including those created by subsequent GAPJC decisions.

It is imperative that the GA use its authority to resolve the urgent pastoral crisis that is hampering the faithful ministry of hundreds of ministers and congregations and continuing to send the message to some children of God that they are less than fully welcomed in the church of Jesus Christ. Because an AI goes into effect as soon as it is issued, this is the fastest way to gain relief so that ministry can happen unhindered in the growing number of places where marriage equality is the law.

A Book of Order Amendment
would remove the gendered language in the current marriage section of the Directory for Worship – language that has been interpreted restrictively and is no longer accurate even as a description since it includes the assertion that “Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man.” It lifts up the values of love, mutual support, and lasting faithfulness both for the married couple and for the faith community. In the spirit of the new and streamlined Form of Government, it seeks to create a broad constitutional framework within which the councils of the church may adapt practices, procedures, and structures to the needs of particular mission.

While the authoritative interpretation addresses the immediate pastoral crisis, an amendment is a longer-term correction to make the Book of Order more accurate.

The Amendment proposal being considered in several presbyteries is Overture 21 from the Presbytery of the Cascades.
Worship at the 2013 Covenant Conference

Frank Yamada on Genesis 2:18-25:

“Becoming One Flesh, One Body”

If there is a truth for what makes human intimate relationships good, of what constitutes a good partner, it is to the extent that the relationship breaks through the fog of human isolation, resulting in the exclamation, “Ah, this indeed is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone.” The truth of the relationship lies not in the gender of the partner but in the way that having someone literally be-SIDE you—someone from your side—helps to overcome the isolation that plagues the human condition.

The grace in this text, the gift that comes from God through this scripture is the holiness, indeed the sanctity and meaningfulness of human relationship that provides the divine ‘ezer, helper, that assists in overcoming the threat to the human condition of facing the world alone.

Sharon Youngs on Ruth 1:

“A More Perfect Union”

At its very best, marriage is an embodiment of God’s hesed – God’s steadfast love and faithfulness. Who do you want by your side when the bottom drops out? ...

What is married? I find myself going back to the story of Ruth and Naomi, a story rooted in God’s hesed – loyal love, kindness and mercy.

Brian Ellison on 1 Corinthians 7:

“Marriage Matters... Why?”

The simple summary of Paul’s response to the swirling questions about marriage here, about celibacy and abstinence, about mutuality and submission, about complementarity and about sex, we might actually say, is: All you need ... is God. Marry if it keeps you from sin; don’t marry if that leads you to serve. Have sex if it gives you joy; abstain if it’s time to pray. Regard one another always, and remember no matter what that eternity – the topsy-turvy transformation that awaits – is what really matters. All you need ... is God.

Photos by Leslie Scanlon, Presbyterian Outlook. Used by permission.

Above: Kimberly Bracken Long taught a pre-conference workshop on marriage liturgies.
Two esteemed church leaders will join the Board of Directors of the Covenant Network. The board elected Clifton Kirkpatrick and Frank Yamada at its October meeting to serve three-year terms beginning in 2014. The board also elected Randy Bush to a three-year term as Co-Moderator, a role in which he will join David Van Dyke, who serves through 2014.

Clifton Kirkpatrick is Visiting Professor of Ecumenical Studies and Global Ministries at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. He served as Stated Clerk of the General Assembly from 1996 to 2008, a period spanning most of the existence of the Book of Order’s G-6.0106b, the ordination standards that the Covenant Network and other groups sought to eliminate. He presided over that churchwide conversation with grace and compassion, seeking to lift those things that unite Presbyterians while creating space to examine essential differences of views.

Preaching at the 2010 Covenant Conference in Houston, Kirkpatrick said, “God is calling us to build our communities and our lives as open communities where all are welcomed and our only intolerance should be toward efforts to exclude those who are different. This spirit has been one of the great gifts of the Covenant Network over the years. We have always sought to broaden the circle but never to exclude others from it. We have carried out our prophetic ministry with kindness and with a view to restoring the wholeness of the family of God. This spirit is needed now more than ever!”

Accurately predicting a successful vote the following spring in presbyteries around the country, Kirkpatrick added, “Things like G-6.0106b will end (hopefully this year!), but the struggle to be a truly inclusive, grace filled, justice seeking family of God must always be our goal.”

Frank Yamada is President of McCormick Theological Seminary. Previously, he directed McCormick’s Center for Asian-American Ministries and taught Hebrew Bible. Yamada has been a leader in advocating for LGBTQ inclusion in the church and has--in the church, the seminary, and the broader academic community--laid an engaging biblical foundation for conversation around sometimes controversial issues.

Preaching at the 2013 Covenant Conference in Chicago, Yamada called on the church to recognize marriage as being about more than gender, rather finding the focus in Genesis 2 to be on finding a “a companion, a partner, a help mate.”

Randy Bush will begin his service as co-moderator in January. He has served as pastor of East Liberty Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh since 2006 and joined the Covenant Network board in 2007. East Liberty, known as the Cathedral of Hope, has long been a leader in working for inclusion and unity in the PCUSA. Bush and the Session were complainants in a landmark case before the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission in 2008, paving the way for the eventual amendment of the church’s ordination standards in 2011.

Bush and David Van Dyke will share leadership through the end of 2014, when Van Dyke’s term ends. Bush succeeds Mary Lynn Tobin, who until recently was pastor of Community Presbyterian Church in Davis, California, and who has served as co-moderator since 2010.
**Toward a Church as Generous and Just as God’s Grace**

**From the Co-moderators**

It’s a new day—in the church and in the work of the Covenant Network! At our Covenant Conference in Chicago, we heard William Stacy Johnson—theologian, minister and lawyer—speak of how the “burden of proof” has shifted across the country and in our denomination. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people no longer have to “prove” their value, their equality, their worthiness of full inclusion and fair treatment. Rather, that is the assumption—and the Church will have to explain any failure to fully welcome and love.

This is an exciting time in the Covenant Network, especially as we approach the next General Assembly. As explained elsewhere in this newsletter, we are fully committed to seeing the necessary steps—including an authoritative interpretation and an amendment of the Book of Order—to ensure pastoral discretion and freedom for all God’s children to marry in our churches. We remain, as always, committed to a conversation that is ever-new, welcoming all viewpoints and inclusive of even those who disagree, that we might grow in strength and display the unity that is God’s gift to the church in Jesus Christ.

David writes: This is our last note together, as Mary Lynn Tobin completes her term as co-moderator. She has served the Covenant Network faithfully and well, holding us to our creative and visionary work, offering meaningful leadership and thoughtful reflection, and always filling our time as a board with laughter and joy. We are excited to welcome Randy Bush as co-moderator; Mary Lynn, as you now pursue new pursuits in life and ministry, you will be missed.

David A. Van Dyke
Pastor, House of Hope
Presbyterian Church,
St. Paul, MN

Mary Lynn Tobin
Leadership Coach
and Facilitator
Davis, CA