

The Lessons of Lake Junaluska

By Executive Director, Karen Booth

“A volatile mix of gay Christians, anti-gay Christians and white supremacists.”

That’s how the Asheville, North Carolina *Citizen-Times* described the controversy sparked by the Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN) convocation “Hearts on Fire.” Billed as a worship/educational conference for “people of all sexual orientations and gender identities,” it was held at Lake Junaluska Conference and Retreat Center over Labor Day weekend. United Methodist renewal leaders had initially broken the story, and the ensuing reaction among evangelicals was mainly calls for protest of one kind or another – petitions, boycotts or the withholding of funds. Concerned local residents expressed their own disapproval in letters-to-the-editor and newspaper ads. The Haywood County Baptist Association staged a counter-event, a nightly tent revival called “Christians for Biblical Values.” Even the Klan promised to make an appearance, a hate-driven response based on their “Queers on Fire” campaign.

And then there was us ... Transforming Congregations. Not so easily categorized, we had decided to take a team to Lake Junaluska for a prayer breakfast the morning before “Hearts on Fire” officially began. First and foremost, we wanted to share our stories of freedom from homosexuality and transgender confusion, our testimonies to God’s amazing and transforming grace. But we also hoped to model an approach that is different from either uncritical acceptance or fearful, even hateful, rejection – what our ministry calls “compassion without compromise.”

The breakfast went very well and there was much to be thankful for. From the start, Junaluska staffers welcomed our ministry with gracious hospitality. One of them had initially suggested the prayer breakfast format, and his crew worked hard to make sure our food, housing and audio/visual needs were met. The PR department assisted us with getting the publicity out and connecting us with local media. Everyone strongly encouraged us to come back again to host a larger gathering, and we’re looking forward to working with them in the future.

Letters, emails and phone calls poured into the national office from supporters coast-to-coast. Even some of the “hierarchy” – a Bishop and DS from the SEJ, and the General Secretary of the World Methodist Council – responded favorably. And even though we had only a few weeks to prepare for and promote the event – and also had to contend with a regional gas shortage – we still had over one hundred people in attendance, some from as far away as Florida, Alabama, Virginia and Maryland.

For one of our speakers – Matthew Thompson – this was the first time he had done his testimony publicly. He, Melissa Jo “MJ” Wilson, Joseph Cluse and Terrence Toon were outstanding, and breakfast participants appreciated their honesty, courage and passion as they shared how the church had helped or hindered their sexual healing. One of our guests wrote, “Karen, I just wanted to let you know how much (my friend) and I enjoyed attending the prayer breakfast. We were very touched and informed by the ‘living witnesses’ that spoke at the breakfast ...May God continue to bless you and God's powerful ministry through you and your staff.”

My time at Junaluska also had a great deal of personal meaning for me because I was able to reconnect with my “home church” pastor who confirmed me in the early 60s. He and his wife have retired at the Lake and now attend a local church there. They took me out to dinner; we caught up on family stories and I shared my heart with them about TC's ministry. They told me how they had hoped that one or more of the RMN folk would have rented the apartment beneath their home for the weekend. They'd wanted the opportunity to reach out to them with the love of Jesus. At the end of our evening together, as they laid hands on me and prayed, I was convinced once again that God was going to work such good out of what happened at Junaluska.

Nonetheless, I returned home with several troubling concerns.

First and foremost was the way that Junaluska leadership was targeted for anger over the “Hearts on Fire” event. After talking extensively with several of the staff there, I believe they were caught “between a rock and a hard place” and tried to make the best decision possible under the circumstances. If we're going to place blame, let's put it squarely where it belongs – on RMN leadership. I've watched them and their cohorts now for two years – seen them in action at General Conference in Pittsburgh last spring and this year at the staged event that was the Beth Stroud trial. They're experts at “street theater” and they thrive on – and even seek out – controversy.^[i] RMN Director, Troy Plummer, also did his darnedest to try to undermine TC in the false comments he gave to the local newspaper.

Still, it's difficult for me not to envy them. They're well-organized, well-publicized and evidently well-funded, with dedicated followers who are not going to give up or go away. Instead of self-promotion, political activism and networking, Transforming Congregations has spent most of its time developing ministry resources. And it shows. We struggle each month just to keep our operating budget afloat.

I was also deeply troubled by evangelicals' inability – or unwillingness – to distinguish between gay activists and other LGBT folk who may or may not want their same-sex attraction and gender

confusion. This was most clearly expressed by our Baptist brothers and sisters. I had so wanted to believe that their hearts were in the right place. The pastor who organized the tent revival had assured me that they were not doing it to encourage hate, but love. He attended our breakfast, and he had asked us to reciprocate by sharing testimony with them on Wednesday evening, which we weren't able to do because of our travel schedules. Several of our Board members did stop by on Thursday; they were appalled when the keynote speaker engaged in the "Biblical value" of name-calling – "faggots," "queers," and "sissies" – along with the suggestion that parents might want to "knock some sense" into a child that was confused about sexual or gender identity.

Finally, some of our other breakfast guests didn't seem to "get it" either. I talked to half a dozen who didn't even know why they were there. They'd heard something was happening in response to "Hearts on Fire;" but they didn't have a clue – even after the presentations – about what we were trying to accomplish. One of them summed it up perfectly when he was overheard muttering, "Well, they told us that gays can change. So what?"

It shouldn't surprise anyone that it's difficult for Christians to come to terms with human sexuality. Personal desire and Biblical belief often collide. But if we will humble ourselves to listen, Paul offered some helpful guidance in his first letter to the Thessalonians, particularly the 4th chapter. Notice that he wrote to fellow believers – brothers and sisters whose faith in Christ had been tested by the fires of persecution, made evident throughout the ancient world by their works of joyful, loving service, and confirmed by powerful acts of the Holy Spirit in their midst.

Yet they still also wrestled with – and obviously sometimes succumbed to – sexual immorality. Not because they hadn't been saved; but because they hadn't been fully sanctified. Those of us that claim a Wesleyan heritage ought to be able to understand the distinction and act on it accordingly. We ought to be able to respond to the sexually sinful as Paul did, with gentleness and affection, "like a mother caring for her little children," or "as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging (them) to live lives worthy of God." (1 Thessalonians 1:7,11-12) We ought to be able to tell them the truth, but without harsh rejection, ridicule or anger.

Some of the folk in the Southeastern Jurisdiction have been living in blissful ignorance. Until a few weeks ago they had never heard of Reconciling Ministries or known about their agenda for The United Methodist Church. If they thought about homosexuality/gender confusion at all, they thought it was an issue mainly affecting our northeastern, north central and western regions. And they considered themselves immune from the battles that tear at the fabric of our Church and nation.

Not any more.

So I am glad that “Hearts on Fire” has roused this “sleeping giant.” As one lay member from Florida wrote, “This entire (Junaluska) episode has caused an awakening within me ... that it is simply not enough to be *against* something. You must also be *for* something.” I pray that he will act on that prompting. I pray that the entire SEJ will rise up – not with *outrage* but *outreach*, and not with continued protest but with proactive ministry and love.

And I pray that Paul’s blessing for the Thessalonians will one day be ours as well: “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.” (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24)
