

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Bart Roush

June 12, 2022

Matthew 5:14–16

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

This month is known as Pride month, a time when LGBTQIA+ communities and their allies come together to celebrate the joy of being their full selves. These celebrations are rooted out of the difficult history of oppression faced by members of this community. The observance of Pride stems from resistance. After years of attacks and oppression, almost 53 years ago at the Stonewall Inn, the modern movement for rights for LGBTQIA+ people was born when the patrons of the bar refused to comply with the New York City police who had raided the bar to harass and arrest them just for being who they were. In the years following, June was marked to remember this event and to celebrate Pride month.

The movement for full inclusion and openness was also happening in the church. More Light Presbyterians, of which Oak Grove Presbyterian Church is a member, has fought for the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons in the church for decades. More Light Presbyterians traces its history through two distinct pathways, the earliest is through a sign held up at Presbyterian General Assembly in 1974 by the Rev. David Sindt that read, “is anyone else out there gay?” This sign led to the formation of a group called Presbyterian for Lesbian and Gay concerns.

The second is after the 1978 Presbyterian ruling that openly LGBTQIA+ people could join and participate in Presbyterian churches, but not serve in official leadership of the church. Several Presbyterian churches took issue with this ruling and declared themselves to be “More Light” Churches because there was “yet more light to shine forth on the scriptures” on, at the time, homosexuality. These churches formally joined together as the More Light Churches Network in 1992. In 1999, both groups merged together to be one organization in 1999, More Light Presbyterians.

Through the decades More Light Presbyterians and its member churches worked diligently and faithfully to bring a fuller inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons into the life, ministry, leadership, and witness of the Presbyterian Church and society. Because of this work, there are now no official barriers for the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons in the ministry and leadership of the church, or to participating fully in the practices of the church in marriage.

In 2018, almost 50 years after Stonewall, the General Assembly made two declarations. One was called, “Celebrating Gifts and Service of LGBTQIA+ in the Church” It read:

“Celebrating the expansive embrace of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the breadth of our mission to serve a world in need, the 223rd General Assembly (2018) affirms the gifts of LGBTQIA+ people for ministry and celebrates their service in the church and in the world.”

The resolution also laments the suffering of LGBTQIA+ people who were hurt by the church’s policies in the past and gives thanks for the persistence of those who worked for change. It notes the ministries of those serving in many capacities in the church today with excellence, and it calls for greater openness, stronger social witness and intentional

effort in ecumenical and mission co-worker relationships to advocate for justice and equality for all people.

The second declaration was called “Affirming People of Diverse Gender Identities” It read:

“Standing in the conviction that all people are created in the image of God and that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for all people, the 223rd General Assembly (2018) affirms its commitment to the full welcome, acceptance, and inclusion of transgender people, people who identify as gender non-binary, and people of all gender identities within the full life of the church and the world. The assembly affirms the full dignity and the full humanity of transgender people, their full inclusion in all human rights, and their giftedness for service. The assembly affirms the church’s obligation to stand for the right of people of all gender identities to live free from discrimination, violence, and every form of injustice.”ⁱ

All of this is wonderful, and yet, we know an official policy, as wonderful as it is, can only go so far. We know that LGBTQIA+ persons are not fully included in the life, work, ministry, and leadership of the church. We know that members of the community are still persecuted. We know there are churches who reject and condemn LGBTQIA+ people. We know that legislatures are attempting to codify hate and formalize oppression into laws based in fear and false narratives that do real harm to the community and that do so often in the name of religious liberty and Christian values.

This is why it is so very important that we continue to declare the love of God for all persons as a More Light Church. This is why we continue to work for full inclusion and justice for LGBTQIA+ people in the church and the society. As Christians, we are called to bear witness to the teaching, spirit, and love in the Gospel, and be light for the world.

More Light Presbyterians names its work and states its belief when it says, “We believe God is bigger than we could ever imagine. We are created in the image of a God of abundance, of limitless possibilities and expansion... We are called to confront God’s holy abundance with awe and wonder. We are abundant because our Creator is abundant. By not limiting our understanding of who God is, we refuse to limit who God loves and welcomes into community.”

To those of you who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community, you are wanted and welcome here. This is place where you can be at home. This is a place where we affirm that you, that all of us, are children of God, made in God’s image. And you are good. You are loved by God, and by Oak Grove Presbyterian Church.

We believe and affirm, nothing can separate you from the fact that you are created in the image of God: not the rejection of your family or of a faith community, not the words or slurs of strangers, not policies policing your body, not your own self-loathing that this world does not yet see you as whole, not whether you are out or closeted. God loves you. We love you. Nothing can take that love away from you. You are loved, you are worthy, you all are children of God.ⁱⁱ

To harken back to the spirit of Pride’s beginning in resistance. May Oak Grove Presbyterian Church continue to be committed to justice and resistance. To Resist hate. Resist fear. Resist the assertion that people who are gay, lesbian, transgender, and queer, that they are not worthy of God’s love.

May we do all we can, in words and deed, in our welcome, inclusion, and in our actions to make this world one of more light in our ongoing commitment to work for justice, to promote reconciliation and healing, and to create equity for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities within the church and in wider society.

Amen

ⁱ <https://covnetpres.org/2018/06/20/a-new-day-for-lgbtqia-people-in-the-church-general-assembly-unanimously-approves-overtures/>

ⁱⁱ Adapted from a statement from More Light Presbyterians after the Pulse Nightclub shooting in 2016.