

Statement by Paul Capetz on January 26, 2008 at a special meeting of the Presbytery of Twin Cities Area.

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I grew up in the church. From earliest childhood through my teen-age years to young adulthood, the church provided the framework within which I came to know myself as a child of God. By the time I had entered high school, I knew that God was calling me into the ministry. In addition to the formative influences of our youth pastors, there were certain life-changing experiences at church camp each summer that crystallized the future direction of my life. I remember one campfire sermon in particular that deeply affected my sense of call. It was based on the story at the end of John's Gospel where the risen Jesus says to Peter: "Do you love me?" Peter answers, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." To which Jesus replies: "Then feed my sheep." That night it was as though Jesus had posed the question directly to me: "Paul, do you love me?" "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." "Then feed my sheep." In responding affirmatively to that call, I had found the direction for my life.

For me to serve the church as an ordained minister meant dedicating my life to an alternative set of values than that which dominates our society in general. It meant to direct my heart to service of God above all else and to love my neighbor as myself. It meant to give myself entirely to God's will for me and to seek to discern that will for me in every situation of my life. This call gave my life meaning and purpose and hope.

But in addition to this youthful sense of purpose and direction, there was an undercurrent of despair that threatened whatever meaning this call to the ministry promised to bestow. That undercurrent was the result of awakening adolescent sexuality. While the teenage years are confusing under the best of circumstances, in my case they were doubly so because what I had yet to learn about myself was that my sexual orientation did not conform to the expected norm. Moreover, there was no language or concepts even to assist me in identifying what it was that made me feel different from other kids my age. I graduated from high school in 1975 and at that time there was no public discourse about homosexuality in the media or in religion or politics. I never saw a TV show or a movie or read a book that dealt with the lives of people like me. In fact, there was nothing but a deafening silence. Indeed, I don't recall ever having heard the word "homosexuality" uttered once during my high school years. All of which is to say that I had to come to terms with this on my own with no help from parents, teachers, friends, or the church. In this respect, the church was no different from the rest of the society around me.

While much has changed in the secular culture on this front, not much has changed in the church. In the 30 plus years since then, I have never heard a sermon that offered wisdom as to how a gay man should live his life in a faithful Christian manner. All I have heard is silence—or, when there was something other than silence, the words have been condemning. If I asked how I was to live my life in a morally responsible way as a Christian, I was told that celibacy was my only option—a life of permanent renunciation of any embodied expression of sexual desire and love. But that was nothing but a counsel of despair. I had answered the call to the ministry when I heard Jesus' words "Feed my sheep," but looking back upon my life I have to admit that the church has left me starving: starving for understanding, guidance, wisdom, and compassion.

Nonetheless, I did enter the ministry, even though I was internally conflicted about this decision, knowing that I was different in a way that the church condemned. When I was ordained in 1991 by the Presbytery of Chicago, I was open to serving either as a parish minister or as a professor since I had gone to graduate school after completing my

professional degree for the ministry. Actually, I had gone to graduate school, not because I had planned to become a professor, but really to buy myself more time to think about what to do with my calling to the ministry in the light of the knowledge that I was harboring a deep secret. It was during that time in graduate school that I began in earnest to study the Protestant Reformation. I vividly recall reading Martin Luther's depiction of his own despair as he struggled to live a celibate lifestyle in the monastery. I saw my situation and my own despair mirrored in his words. Once I understood why Luther, Calvin, and the other Protestant Reformers categorically rejected vows of celibacy as incompatible with what they believed was the essential tenet of Reformed faith, namely justification by faith alone, I found the key to making sense of my own plight as a gay Protestant. I realized that by requiring of gay persons like me a vow of celibacy as a condition of our moral acceptability as Christians, the contemporary Protestant church had fallen back on its own sword that had originally been used to attack what they identified as distorted in the Roman Catholic doctrine and practice of their day. Not only did I see my despair around sexuality reflected in Luther's account of his despair about sexuality, but I found my answer in the answer Luther first propounded and which gave the Reformation its start.

For the first time in the history of Protestantism, a vow of celibacy is being required of an entire caste of persons as a condition of their suitability for leadership in the church though the original platform of the Reformation was unambiguously opposed to vows of celibacy as contrary to the nature of the gospel. In its categorical opposition to all expressions of homosexuality, the Protestant church has unintentionally found itself having to deny one of its own essential tenets, namely that vows of celibacy are wrong because they imply works-righteousness before God.

My first call was to teach Reformed theology at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, one of our Presbyterian seminaries. As soon as I had accepted this call, however, attempts were made to revoke it on the grounds that I was a gay man. Although I had never made a public statement to this effect, this event taught me a hard lesson about the church's "don't ask, don't tell" policy. Even if a gay person should seek to comply with it, there are no guarantees that one's job will be secure in the church. After one year I left Union to take the position I have occupied at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities for the past 15 years since United, unlike Union, has a non-discrimination policy with respect to gay persons. A few years after coming to United, Austin Presbyterian Seminary asked me to apply for a position on their faculty, but when I told them that I was gay the invitation was revoked. When in the year 2000 I asked to be released from the exercise of the ordained ministry it was on account of the passage of so-called "Amendment B" (G-6.0106b) that, in effect, demanded a vow of celibacy for gay officers in the church. I should clarify that G-6.0106b would not in fact be a vow of celibacy for gay people if the church recognized the validity of marriage between two men or two women. If that were the case, I would have no difficulty abiding by the standard of "chastity in singleness" and "fidelity in marriage." But as it now stands, while the door is always open for single straight persons to get married, that door is slammed shut for gay people with the result that permanent celibacy is our only option if we would serve the church.

I stand before you today, not because the standards have changed, but because the 2006 General Assembly has recognized the right of candidates for the ministry to declare a "departure" (historically known as a "scruple"), that is, a principled moral or theological objection to something in the constitution. My departure, as I have already indicated, is that I refuse to take a vow of celibacy. For me, this refusal is the only consistent response for one who is committed to the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in our *Book of Confessions*. Not only do I believe that the moral position of the church on the

matter of homosexuality is wrong since it is incapable of making any serious moral distinction between promiscuity and prostitution, on the one hand, and a life-long committed monogamous relation (or "marriage") on the other hand, but I also believe that this fatally flawed moral position has had the ironic side-effect of backing the church into a theological corner where it has been forced to deny implicitly one of its own essential theological tenets.

In the final analysis, what is decided here today about my case is a relatively minor matter. What is of ultimate significance, however, is whether the Christian church will ever have anything other than a counsel of despair to offer to all those gay persons who grow up in its midst or who would gladly turn to it for spiritual and moral wisdom.