



**"Equipping the Church to Model and Minister Sanctified Sexuality"
1 Thessalonians 4:1-6**

Fall/Winter 2008

Dear friend of Transforming Congregations,

Greetings in the name of Emmanuel, God with us!

Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* begins with the now classic line "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." But many people (myself included) don't know or remember the words that follow:

"It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness ... it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair ... we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way ..."

Sometimes I read that paragraph and think that Dickens had a prophetic take on 21st century American culture and faith, especially as it relates to sex and marriage. For the times we live in often seem dark, foolish, hopeless, and even hellish.

Several recent examples come to mind. For example, evangelical Christian matchmaker eHarmony.com caved in (or sold out) to legal pressure and has agreed to start offering dating services for same-sex couples. After California voters successfully passed traditional marriage legislation, religious financial supporters were publicly hounded and some of them coerced into resigning from their jobs. And just in time for the holiday season, Newsweek's most recent cover story, "Mutual Joy," argued that there is no Biblical warrant against same-sex marriage. (For an excellent critique of the article, check out Dr. Robert Gagnon's website at <http://robgagnon.net/ArticlesOnline.htm>.)

Events this summer and fall in The United Methodist Church (UMC) were just as troubling. Hundreds of active and retired pastors in California announced that they would officiate at same-sex "marriages," even though it was in obvious violation of their ordination vows. And retired Bishops Susan Morrison and Jesse Dewitt presided over two "extraordinary ordinations" for the Church Within a Church Movement, one for a self-proclaimed lesbian and the other for a heterosexual woman denied regular ordination because of her radically pro-gay views. No action has been taken to discipline any of them.

Even though neither act of UMC disobedience had (or will have) any official standing, both were "slaps in the face" to the many faithful who hold to denominational teaching and policy. And sadly, it won't end there. The Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN) is devoted to "full participation" (meaning same-sex marriage and ordination) of "all sexual orientations and gender identities" in the UMC. Those all inclusive plurals – orientations and identities – should set off alarm bells.

So should RMN's five year strategic plan to:

- train 750 RMN volunteers
- initiate an active RMN presence in each of the 63 Annual Conferences (Check <http://www.rmnwitness.org/annual-conferences.html> to see if yours is a target)
- host 70 district level RMN forums
- organize 1,000 meetings with Annual Conference voting delegates, and
- recruit 375 local congregations to sign on to and sponsor pro-gay church legislation.

Such ambitious grassroots efforts call for a very big pocketbook. It's likely that RMN has gotten a piece of the recent Haas Fund grant, a \$1.2 million contribution to pro-gay advocacy groups within the Mainline. As the Institute for Religion and Democracy wrote, "The Haas Fund probably does not really care about the church. It sees faith communities as means to an end – gay rights, and redefining sexuality and marriage in our law and culture. The real goal ... is to redefine basic tenets of our faith to make our churches mirror the prevailing culture."

I have to acknowledge that staggering financial figure makes me envious. But I also have to trust that while political activism may at times seem to have the upper hand, unrighteousness will not triumph. Witnessing to the truth and living lives of sanctified sexuality will ultimately prevail, and they, not politics, will help to heal and free individuals who are captive to sexual sin. Scripture is there to constantly remind me that "some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God. (Psalm 20:7)

I thank God for the opportunities He has given TC this year. Promoting and presenting our "Starting Ministry" workshop and networking with local churches has been our primary objective for 2008, so I'm pleased to report that hundreds of church leaders – lay and clergy – have worked with us this year. I wish I could point you to a local church partner that is intensively striving to reach out in hands-on ministry, but that is still on the horizon. (Please keep praying that would develop more fully in 2009.)

But it's also becoming clearer that many folk cannot adequately explain why it (sexual sanctification) even matters. So we're also turning our attention back to some of our foundational goals of education. We have tentative invitations to speak at two seminaries in Kentucky and Iowa this coming spring. And in May, TC will co-sponsor a ground-breaking seminar with LifeWatch, one of our sister renewal ministries in the UMC. Called "Theology of the Body: An Ecumenical Introduction to John Paul II's Teaching," it will feature Duke Seminary professor Paul Griffiths in an exploration of the deeper theological meaning of male/female creation, human sexuality and spousal love. If all goes well, we'll have the proceedings published, and there's even a good possibility it can be replicated and "taken on the road." (You can find out more about the seminar on our website at www.transcong.org/TOB.htm.)

I also thank God for His generous provision. Though our overall income is still down almost \$10,000 from two years ago, it did keep pace with 2007. We were just able to meet our budget, but we also had to cut back on some travel and other activities that would have promoted the ministry.

So if you would like to make an end-of-year contribution, you can access a donation form on our website at <http://www.transcong.org/donationform.pdf>. Non-profits receive their greatest amount of income in November through January, and TC is no exception. Be assured that any gift you give will be used to further equip and educate local church leaders.

I'll close with another prophetic word, this one from Exodus Global Alliance. Please pray that TC will remain faithful to the same vision and call:

The world is changing. The need for ministry is growing. God is at work. He is sending winds of renewal. He is opening doors that have been locked. He is inviting us to enter into larger ministry that more people might hear and respond to His message of truth and grace.

Blessings,

