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'The Congregation'—Conflict Comes Out of the Closet

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Several years ago, WETA, the Public Broadcasting System affiliate in Washington, D.C, commissioned Alan and Susan Raymond, producers of well known "cinema verite" documentaries to produce a film that would focus on the inner life and dynamic of an older Protestant congregation. Dalton Delan, WETA's chief programming officer, explained that the station wanted a look within the life of a liberal congregation, not a church "on some new fringe, not a born-again church in a movie theater, not a snake-charming one." Well, if they were looking for a liberal church, they certainly found one.

The producers settled on one of the nation's oldest Methodist congregations, the First United Methodist Church of Germantown in suburban Philadelphia. The production team spent two years filming various events within the life of the congregation and included hours of interviews with church members, leaders, ministers, and others. The church certainly qualifies as liberal, having adopted "social justice" programs as a major theme years ago and identifying in recent times as a "reconciling" congregation that is committed to the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons in the church.

The church meets in a beautiful old stone building, but there is nothing conservative about the congregation itself. As the Raymonds explained, "Though outwardly very traditional in appearance, the church has actually been quite liberal in its theology and the causes it embraced. We thought that the contrast between the congregation's liberal heritage against the backdrop of the historic and traditional setting would add a dramatic element." The documentary, though painful to watch, certainly does not lack for drama.

The First United Methodist Church of Germantown [FUMCOG] was a deeply troubled congregation when the Raymonds and their documentary team arrived. A liberal pastor who had served the church for 37 years had recently retired, and he was followed by the Reverend Fred Day, whose style of leadership was less charismatic and whose leadership in worship was considered too conventional by many church members.

"The Congregation" focuses first on the excruciating level of conflict, described by church members as a "disconnect," between the church and its pastor. The early parts of the documentary present a troubling picture of a pastor whose liberalism apparently leads him to tolerate even the most graphic dissent against his ministry, with no apparent defense of his leadership to be offered. The church members—priding themselves on being even more liberal than their pastor—make various complaints against the church's minister. Nevertheless, the film never makes clear exactly what stands as the focal point of the controversy. Reverend Fred Day certainly seems nice enough—it is hard to see how he could be threatening to anyone. Even teenagers in the church felt free to hurl criticisms at their pastor. For the most part, the complaints came down to whining and vacuous emotional outbursts.

At the same time, the Raymonds clearly intended for the portrait of conflict within FUMCOG to represent larger trends in liberal Protestantism. As their press release explained, “‘The Congregation’ presents a microcosm of those mainline Protestant churches which have historically supported such causes as civil rights, racial and economic equality, anti-war movements and full inclusion of homosexuals. Churches like the First United Methodist Church of Germantown, itself a long-time standard bearer for such causes, are challenged by declining membership and by more conservative voices from both inside and outside of their denomination. This is a congregation that must persistently fight for both its liberal heritage and its financial stability.”

They are certainly not fighting for biblical fidelity and theological orthodoxy. This becomes painfully clear when the Raymonds got more than they bargained for, and the church’s associate pastor and youth minister declared from the pulpit that she is a practicing homosexual and effectively dared the denomination to defrock her.

The associate pastor, Irene Elizabeth “Beth” Stroud was in the nation’s headlines just last December when a jury of United Methodist clergy convicted her of violating the church’s discipline, which forbids the participation of “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” in the ordained ministry.

The Raymonds went to FUMCOG looking for conflict, but they claim to have had no idea that one of the church’s ministers was about to come out of the closet.

The Raymonds are not strangers to controversy, as some of their previous projects have also landed them in the spotlight. But when Beth Stroud announced her homosexuality and challenged the church to either accept her homosexuality or remove her credentials, the Raymonds found themselves filming what would become a milestone event as the United Methodist Church deals with the issue of homosexuality.

As the documentary reveals, Beth Stroud had to admit that she had been dishonest in the process that led to her ordination. She would later explain that she had come to terms with her homosexuality as a student at Bryn Mawr College. Nevertheless, she went through the ordination process in the United Methodist Church knowing full well that the denomination’s official policy precluded self-avowed practicing homosexuals from the ministry. “I have not been fully honest or done full disclosure throughout the ordination process,” she acknowledged. “I was never really sure how I would handle a direct question about my sexual orientation in the ordination process. I figured if someone came out and said, ‘Are you a lesbian?’ I was going to say ‘yes’ and that would be the end of the process.”

In her now famous “coming out” sermon, Stroud cloaked her declaration of homosexuality in the language of liberation and Christian enlightenment. “I want to take my experience of the risen Christ out of the locked room, out of the closet, and into the world where everyone can see it. I want to walk and the lights of Christ will be revealed in my life.”

That statement—and Beth Stroud’s defense throughout the process—indicates something of what passes for serious theological argument in what is left of liberal Protestantism. A vague but highly useful concept of liberation is really all that remains. Jesus is transformed into an agent of gay liberation and a declaration of homosexuality becomes an exercise in personal “authenticity.”

“I have realized that not telling the truth about myself has been holding me back in my faith,” Stroud asserted. “I have come to a place where my discipleship, my walk with Christ, required telling the whole truth and paying whatever price truthfulness requires.”

In the course of her sermon, Stroud identified her partner, with whom she had been living in a “covenant relationship” for the last two and a half years. “More than anyone in my life,” Stroud stated, “Kris embodies grace and love and discipleship for me.”

Stating her challenge to the church in boldest form, Beth Stroud declared: “Despite all of the rules and locked doors and prohibitions, here I am for this Sunday at least, and perhaps for many months to come, your openly lesbian, fully credentialed, United Methodist pastor.”

Interestingly, the web site for “The Congregation” includes an essay by Jamie Stroud, Beth’s mother, a licensed marriage and family therapist. Jamie Stroud is herself an advocate for the inclusion of homosexuals within the United

Methodist Church. In her essay, she congratulated her daughter because “I know she is doing the right thing and I am amazed and proud of her way of handling the entire situation.” Jamie Stroud unleashed her fury on the United Methodist Church. In her words, “I feel betrayed by my church. I am deeply hurt by this denomination that raised me, that taught me Jesus’ and God’s love and acceptance of each of us as individuals, that taught me about unconditional love, that taught me to be accepting of all persons, and that now tells me that my beloved daughter is unacceptable as a minister?” She asserted that Beth “is much more qualified than many other pastors who are filling pulpits and taking no stands.”

Occasionally, the focus of the documentary returns to Fred Day, who appears at some points in the film as little more than a passive bystander. Nevertheless, this senior minister, considered by some church members to be too “conservative,” celebrated Beth Stroud’s coming out and employed the most unsettling references to Scripture in making his excitement clear. “This is like the verse in Luke that says, ‘Rejoice and be glad, for this one who was lost is found,’ this one who had to ‘hide out’ now can be completely and openly and honestly who God made them to be.” In other words, Fred Day argues that God made Beth Stroud to be a homosexual, and that her “coming out of the closet” is tantamount to what Jesus used as a metaphor for salvation.

Day’s statement about the lost sheep coming home completely reverses the logic of Jesus’ parable, but he was able to top that ludicrous statement with an even more over-the-top celebration of Stroud’s disclosure of homosexuality. “But it’s part and parcel the meaning of the Gospel,” Day declared. “It is Easter applied; the Gospel applied.”

The documentary concludes with Beth Stroud’s trial and conviction, and the failure of the reconciliation process that had been intended to establish peace between the church’s senior minister and the congregation. The documentary’s web site reveals that Day has asked not to be reassigned to the church in the coming year, and his term as pastor will end in early summer.

In the end, “The Congregation” succeeds in offering a unique perspective into the life of a very liberal, very troubled congregation. The film is painful to watch, but important to see. Throughout the entire project, no one seems to see any need to consult the Bible about the issues of controversy—certainly about the issue of homosexuality. The congregation of FUMCOG is clearly held together by a passionate commitment to liberal causes combined with an emotive and affective style of worship. In one sense, the film reveals to viewers everything they need to know to understand the paralyzing accommodationism that marks so many liberal denominations.

Conservatives within the United Methodist Church, organized into what is now known as the “Confessing Movement,” are seeking to call the denomination back to its biblical commitment and theological heritage. “The Congregation” offers a sobering reminder of just what these evangelicals are up against.

