

Rev. Mary L. Merriman

c/o MCC

PO Box 673

Lancaster, Pa. 17603

(717)392-2729

April 22, 1992

Members of the House of Representatives

Members of the Judiciary Committee

Honored Guests:

I am Rev. Mary L. Merriman, and I am here today to speak in support of HB 1353 to include provisions against violence toward gay and lesbian people. I speak for myself, as the Pastor of Vision of Hope Metropolitan Community Church, as a member of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, and as a member of the Coalition to Pass HB 1353.

I serve as the Pastor of Vision of Hope Metropolitan Community Church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. I have served in this capacity since 1987 when I came to Lancaster from Lakeland, Florida where I served as the Founding Pastor of Good News MCC since 1983 when I was initially licensed as a member of the clergy. Further I have been involved in Metropolitan Community Churches since 1977 as a member of the congregation in Baltimore, Md. and in Tampa, Florida.

Vision of Hope Metropolitan Community Church is a member congregation of our denomination, the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches founded in 1968 in Huntington Beach California as a Christian church which offers a church home to those who share the faith professed by Metropolitan Community Churches. Presently we have approximately 250 churches - five of which are located in Pennsylvania - and the remainder in 15 countries. We have a registered membership of 35,000 people. In much the same vein as many mainline denominations, our statement of faith, which is attached in its complete form (Appendix A), professes God as - Creator, Christ, and the Holy Spirit and that we are justified by our faith in God's love for us through Jesus Christ. Implicit in our statement of faith, we depart from mainline Christianity in our belief and profession of God's love for all people including those people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered or transvestite. We believe that the Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God and that it does not condemn homosexuality but rather affirms the consensual, loving, life-giving and whole relationships of all people. A bibliography of books addressing these teachings is attached (Appendix B).

The central issue today, however, is not the interpretation of the Scriptures or the issue of homosexuality. Rather the central issue which I am here to address is the rising violence directed toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. The UFMCC is no stranger to this violence. As our congregations are largely comprised of lesbian and gay people, since our founding in 1968 our denomination has experienced fire bombings to our churches,

assaults on our members, crosses on our lawns, and the desecration of our churches. In one devastating fire in 1973, 13 members of our congregation in New Orleans lost their lives during a worship service when a fire bomb was launched. The most recent fire was in 1990 in San Francisco when our church there was fire bombed twice in six months.

As a result of my involvement in the gay and lesbian community during the past fifteen year, I would like to share with you some of what I have experienced. I recall a man named John who lived in Florida and who picked up another man in a cruising area. One week later John died as a result of the injuries he sustained at the hands of the man he picked up. These injuries included being severely beaten, having his eyes gouged out and castration. Another incident involved a man living in New York. He was beaten by twenty-three men because of their problems with his orientation. In addition to other injuries, both of his hips were broken. Finally, several years ago - following the fire bombing of one of our churches in Tallahassee, Florida - I participated in a Trek for Gay and Lesbian Christians across northern Florida. One night, as we prepared our campsite, a group of men riding in the back of a pick up truck each displaying a shot gun, rode through our camp warning us to leave by nightfall and as they drove away they continued shouting their obscenities.

As a local Pastor, I am often privy to incidents of assault going on in the local region or I am asked to assist in counseling after an assault has taken place. Since my tenure in Lancaster, I have

known of numerous assaults, name calling, and property damage done Lancaster during the past four years. I would like to share four of the most recent incidents with you.

Two of these incidents involved phone calls at two in the morning to learn of the bombing of a local bookstore which carried gay and lesbian literature. I dressed and went down to the bookstore. I can still smell the gunpowder from the incendiary devices which had blown out the front windows on both occasions and had done other damage. As several people gathered with the owner of the store, we talked about our disbelief that this could happen, our anger with people in our society who support and even seem to encourage this kind of violence through their rhetoric. We also talked of our deep determination to see an end to the violence and discrimination directed by society toward lesbian and gay people. Unspoken, though evident, was the face of fear all about us. Finally, our anger and frustration became even more exasperated as the police labelled the explosions a 'criminal mischief' since the law is silent on crimes of violence committed because of an assailants prejudice toward homosexuals.

A third incident involved a man who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. As he made his way home, he walked through what is known as an area frequented by lesbian and gay people. A groups of young men attacked him savagely beating him severely and breaking his wrist. During his assailant's trial, his assailants said they were out just to 'gay bash' and that they thought he was 'one of them'. They never meant to beat up a non-gay person! Their

defense attorney characterized his clients as 'boys who made a stupid mistake'. They were charged with the beating, however, as the law is silent on attacks motivated by prejudice toward homosexuality - their sentence never took into account the real source of their crime.

The fourth incident occurred last month to a member of my congregation named Dave. Dave was walking home from a gay bar and was followed by another man. The man sexually assaulted Dave. The assailant was subsequently identified after being arrested for the rape of a 64 year old disabled woman. The assailant was furthered identified as having robbed and assaulted two other gay men, one of whom had to be hospitalized as a result of the injuries he sustained. The assailant pled guilty to all of the charges, including his parole violation and is awaiting sentencing. Once more, however, the law is needing to be strengthened to state that crimes of violence based on one's prejudice are not tolerated as the prejudicial nature of these crimes continues to go unpunished.

As I have experienced it, and as I counsel with people who are victims of these kinds of crimes, I can tell you that in addition to the sense of degradation experienced by the victims, there is a tremendous sense of powerlessness. For centuries, lesbian and gay people have been forced by society to participate in a conspiracy of silence as they (gay and lesbians) are threatened with disclosure of their orientation and with the possible subsequent loss of their homes, jobs, family, friends and churches. This intimidation is today increasing in its violence and is only

being mediated by the attempts of many to bring this conspiracy to the forefront. Lesbian and gay people have existed since the beginning of time, though our understanding of the orientation has only been increasing in the past thirty to forty years. Today, we hear of studies which are tending to support a genetic basis for this orientation.

Whether or not there is a genetic basis for sexual orientation has no relationship to the statute which we are here today to address. This statute is intended to speak to the perpetration of coercion and violence by society toward lesbian and gay people. There is no excuse for this kind of conduct. We live in a country which prides itself on its leadership and advocacy of the democratic ideal which guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of privacy. These ideals are being diminished day by day by those who choose not to support the tenets of our constitution and who instead are taking advantage of the laws silence on the issue of sexual orientation to advance their own doctrines of prejudice and hatred.

As a Pastor, I am deeply offended and concerned with the conduct of any person who displays violence or coercion toward any individual. Christianity is very clear in its teachings of what human justice and dignity are all about. As God is the Creator of all, every person has the right to expect dignity and justice as their legacy and right as a human being. Too often, even religious people who oppose homosexuality seek to enforce their beliefs of who is accepted and not accepted by taking selected

passages of the Scriptures out of context to advance their cause and/or to build their congregations. The teachings of Jesus in the Gospels and of the Old Testament which demand human dignity cannot be so easily put aside, especially when judgment day finally comes to each of us and we are called to stand before God and to give an accounting for our lives and the way in which we live them.

Last week in Lancaster on Good Friday, a re-enactment of the trial, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus was held in Penn and Lancaster Square. Between five and twenty thousand people came out to see this presentation. Street players were in the crowds dressed in the garb of Jesus time. In front of the statue in the square sat Pilate, his guards, Caiaphas the high priest and before them stood Jesus. Pilate called out to Jesus to answer the charges of the high priest. After Pilate's examination, he proclaimed that he found no basis for the charge and the request of the high priest to find him guilty of sedition and to put Jesus to death. However, Pilate didn't want to alienate the high priest and called up a law that allowed him to free one prisoner each year and to execute the other if that was the wish of the crowd. As I stood in the crowd, players cried out for Jesus crucifixion, while others cried out for his freedom.

Tears came to my eyes as I remembered my conversation the previous evening with the man who had been beaten by twenty-three others. My mind also went back to a time last year in our city council chambers when throngs of people came out to protest the ordinance

being considered by the city council. I remembered the terror, fear and confusion of that night. I also remembered talking with a friend of mine who was black who said he couldn't stay in the chambers that night as the attitude, the speeches, and the general sense of hostility reminded him of the sixties where color was then, as it is still too often now, the issue of attack. I remembered my readings of the persecution of homosexuals by the Nazi's and the horrendous accounts of the humiliation, torture and death of 250,00 or more homosexuals in addition to Jews, Catholics, gypsies and other 'undesirables'. As I listened to the cries of condemnation and for mercy in the crowd in Lancaster last week, all of the years of persecution of so many people because of societies disease and sin of prejudice seemed to be on trial once more.

Each of us has a continual role in the crucifixion of Jesus who said "Whatever you do to my brothers and sisters, even the least of these, you do also to me." (Mt.25:40) Placing the trial of Jesus in the context of today's concern, the scenario would look like this. The actions and hostility of our society toward lesbian and gay people assumes the role of judgment exemplified by Caiaphas and the people who called for Jesus crucifixion in the crowd. Lesbian and gay people, against whom there is no law that is being broken in Pennsylvania and I believe in Christianity today, stand as the innocents in the role of Jesus. The Pennsylvania legislature then assumes the role of Pilate. We are coming to you to ask you to assist us in protection under the law and to clarify the law by saying to the crowds "They have done

nothing wrong under our laws, therefore your actions of coercion and violence are not appropriate regardless of your (society's) beliefs." The problem here is societies prejudice that is and should be on trial. Will you, like Pilate, who must say there is no guilt, refuse your responsibility and once more -as he did - do what is expedient and questionably beneficial to your careers or will you change history and stand on the side of the innocents in this matter? Will you uphold the legacy of pride in our democracy that was designed to protect the rights of all people or will you also aid in it's deterioration? Will you participate in this call today to further dismantle societies disease of oppression or will you put another nail into the our cross?

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

APPENDIX A

UNIVERSAL FELLOWSHIP OF METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCHES
STATEMENT OF FAITH

DOCTRINE: Christianity is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and is the religion set forth in the Scriptures. Jesus Christ is foretold in the Old Testament, presented in the New Testament, and proclaimed by the Christian church in every age and in every land. Founded in the interest of offering a church home to all who confess and believe, the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches moves in the mainstream of Christianity. Our faith is based upon the principles outlined in the historic creeds: Apostles and Nicene.

We believe:

1. In one triune God, omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient, of one substance and of three persons: God - our Parent-Creator; Jesus Christ the only begotten son of God, God in flesh, human; and the Holy Spirit - God as our Sustainer.
2. That the Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God, showing forth God to every person through the law and the prophets, and finally, completely and ultimately on earth in the being of Jesus Christ.
3. That Jesus...the Christ...historically recorded as living some 2,000 years before this writing, is God incarnate, of human birth, fully God and fully human, and that by being one with God, Jesus has demonstrated, once and forever, that all people are likewise Children of God, being spiritually made in God's image.
4. That the Holy Spirit is God making known God's love and interest to all people. The Holy Spirit is God, available to and working through all who are willing to place their welfare in God's keeping.
5. Every person is justified by grace to God through faith in Jesus Christ.
6. We are saved from loneliness, despair and degradation through God's gift of grace, as was declared by our Savior. Such grace is not earned, but is a pure gift from a God of pure love. We further commend the community of the faithful to a life of prayer; to seek genuine forgiveness for unkind, thoughtless and unloving acts; and to a committed life of Christian service.
7. The Church serves to bring all people to God through Christ. To this end, it shall arrange for regular services of worship, prayer, interpretation of the Scriptures, and edification through the teaching and preaching of the Word.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES FOR THE STUDY OF
HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE SCRIPTURES

3

BOOKS

Boswell, John, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe From the Beginning of the Christian Era to the 14th Century*, Chapters 1 - 6, published in 1980 by University of Chicago Press (5801 Ellis Ave., Chicago, IL 60637).

Edwards, George, *Gay/Lesbian Liberations: A Biblical Perspective*, published in 1984 by Pilgrim Press (132 West 31 St., New York, NY 10001).

Horner, Tom, *Jonathan Loved Davids: Homosexuality in Biblical Times*, published in 1978 by Westminster Press (925 Chestnut St., Philadelphia, PA 19107).

McNeill, John, *The Church and the Homosexual*, new edition published in 1985 by Next Year Publications (316 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10001).

Nugent, Robert (editor), *A Challenge to Loves: Gay and Lesbian Catholics in the Church*, Part 2 - Biblical and Theological Perspectives, published in 1984 by Crossroad Publishing Co. (370 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017).

Scanzoni, Letha and Virginia Ramey Mollencott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor: Another Christian View*, published in 1978 by Harper & Row Publishers (10 East 53rd St., New York, NY 10022).

Scroggs, Robin, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate*, published in 1983 by Fortress Press (2900 Queen Lane, Philadelphia, PA 19129).

Nelson, James B., "Embodiment". Augsburg Publishing House 1978,
Minneapolis, Minn.

Tinney, James S. "Homosexuality: A Guide for Those in Pastoral Ministry" Washington, D.C. 1985

McNaught, Brian "A Disturbed Peace" Dignity Inter. Washington, D.C. 1981

Fortunato, John E. "Embracing The Exile" Seabury Press, 815 Second Ave. N.Y.N.Y. 10017 1982