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# McKinney Counseling and Consulting

Pastoral Counseling for Individuals and Couples / Pastoral Consulting for Clergy and Churches

## Ten Years of Transfiguration

Do you ever wish you could get an update on someone or something from your past?

I sure do. For example, I sometimes wonder what ever happened to Cindy King.

Cindy was the first girl I ever kissed. It came on the playground in kindergarten

and it was not a totally unsatisfying experience. I wonder what happened to Cindy?

Something tells me she is not in a convent.

Yes, it would be nice to get updates on people and things from the past. I imagine there are folks around this country who wonder what ever happened to that Baptist church in North Carolina that decided to bless the unions of gay men and lesbians.

Did hellfire and brimstone swallow them up? Did they have to close up shop because they could not get anyone to fill the pews and they had no way to pay their bills?

Well, apparently neither one of those things happened, but we still pass the offering plates just to make sure.

On February 10, 2002, Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina celebrated the tenth anniversary of its vote to be a congregation that is fully welcoming and affirming of gay and lesbian Christians. And here is the update:

We are alive, we are strong, and God is still blessing us! Ten years later the reverberations continue to be felt both inside and outside of our walls. Lives continue to be changed, hope continues to blossom, and Pullen has become a lighthouse in a sea of religious intolerance. The media stopped calling a long time ago, but not a week goes by that someone does not call looking for help, encouragement, and the knowledge that there are Christians in this world who do not condemn people simply because of the way they were created. For the members who lived through those events ten years ago, and whose memories contain the pain and the joy of that time, it seems impossible that it has already been a decade. For the dozens and dozens of people who have joined Pullen in the intervening years, many of them directly because of the holy union vote, they give thanks for a church that is providing a safe haven for all of God's children. Yes, the update is in and it is a story filled with grace and wonderful surprises.

It seemed appropriate that the anniversary fell on Transfiguration Sunday. After all, Transfiguration Sunday is the day when we focus on two scripture passages that highlight mountaintop experiences: Moses going up Mt. Sinai to meet God

and receive the Ten Commandments and Jesus journeying up the mountain with his disciples where he is transfigured before their very eyes. Two spiritual moments beyond compare. Two incidents filled with the glory of God. Some of the people who lived through the holy union process have described the discussions and vote as one of the most enlightening spiritual experiences of their life. A church struggling to discern the will of God, seeking to listen to one another's very different points of view, and striving to do it all with love and understanding constitutes a mountaintop religious experience. It did not always feel that way to the church as it went through that harrowing time, though. Oftentimes our greatest spiritual moments are accompanied by unparalleled fear and trembling. Ten years later we remembered all of it. We remembered the presence of God in the holy union discussion and vote. We remembered the peak religious experiences. We remembered the loss of faithful church members who could not stay for reasons of conscience. It is all part of the story, the story of God's dealings with a particular church.

But the story didn't end ten years ago, just as the story of Jesus' transfiguration did not end on that mountaintop. The transfiguration went on, only it was the disciples who came down from the mountain who experienced a gradual transfiguration as they developed into the body of Christ. In a similar manner there has been an ongoing transfiguration at Pullen Memorial Baptist Church since the day of our momentous vote.

So, what are the ways in which the congregation has continued to experience transfiguration because of the holy union decision? One way is the depth of faith that the church has learned and expressed. Ten years ago when Pullen risked the condemnation of many people by openly embracing gay and lesbian children of God, it was not clear if the step the church was taking was off the end of a cliff or down the road to life. It is easy to look back now that it has turned out so well and downplay the dangers and uncertainties the decision carried with it. But let us never forget the extraordinary act of faith demonstrated by Mahan Siler, Pullen's pastor at the time, and the courageous membership, to make that step into the unknown. And because of the congregation's willingness to risk, members have grown in their understanding of what it means to be a people of faith. It means exploring possibilities that previously were not even in our worldview. It means trusting the Spirit of God as it moves within our midst. But first and foremost it means acting. We know now that faith is not something we merely have. It is something we do. Such an understanding of faith has continued to cause a transfiguration in our fellowship.

Another way in which the actions of the congregation ten years ago have produced an ongoing transfiguration is the sense of community that has blossomed here. While

some asked if Pullen would become a “gay” church, the reality is that such questions have ceased to even have meaning. We are the body of Christ, wonderfully diverse in every way, and the relationships that have formed over this past decade have produced a spirit of community that might seem incomprehensible to people outside of our church. Yes, many gay men and lesbians have become members because of Pullen’s decision, but so have numerous straight families who united with the church because of the vision of inclusion they saw expressed. But the sense of community coming out of the decision goes far beyond issues of sexual orientation. Those members who disagreed with the decision, but remained in the church, have provided one of the strongest witnesses to the meaning of Christian community. Their willingness to remain engaged, to form relationships, and to keep supporting their church has been a catalyst to the deeper understanding of genuine community that has flourished here.

Another lesson we have learned in the continual transfiguration of this congregation is that there really is something called redemptive suffering. Pullen has discovered that there are times when faith compels us to suffer for a greater cause. The losses this church experienced in the aftermath of the decision were real and painful: the loss of good friends, the loss of a denominational home, and many more. But the advantage of a decade’s worth of hindsight lets us see the value of such suffering. The lives that continue to be impacted, and the vision that continues to be expressed, remind us that there are moments in life when we choose the hard path because there is so much at stake. We have learned that lesson as a church and it will serve us well in the future when faith calls us to suffer again.

The tenth anniversary of our controversial decision provided many people a chance to reflect. We recognized that ten years later the way many of us see our gay sisters and brothers has changed so much it is as though they have been transfigured before us. The reality is that we are the ones who have been transfigured. We have been changed and the changing will not stop now. Yes, the update is in. Pullen is alive, we are strong, and God is still blessing us! Let the transfiguration spread to every church!

Jack McKinney  
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