

*V*oices
of
*S*ophia

and Voices of Women

This article was written by
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As we stand on the threshold of the twenty-first century ...

- ... we acknowledge the changed role of women, and men, in church and society;
- ... we unite as women and men of faith to take our place as equal partners in the expression of that faith;
- ... we claim our voices in expressing who God is for us;
- ... we share our vision of the church as an inclusive community; and
- ... we call upon the church to celebrate the theological and liturgical contributions of women to the life of the community

So begins the invitation to membership in a new feminist group of, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). *Voices of Sophia* is the manifestation of a dream that is more than ten years old, the dream of creating a community that would be a forthright voice for women in the church. Several of us who are Presbyterian and have worked on issues related to the status of women have talked about such a group and repeatedly asked the question, "Is it time yet?" Always the answer seemed to be "no," until the fall of 1994.

Increasingly in the 1980's and 90's, Presbyterians who advocate justice for women and all marginalized people have felt the effects of a continuing backlash against them and against their work on behalf of the church in the larger society. The event known as Re-Imagining, a gathering of 2200 women and men in Minneapolis to celebrate women and the theologies of women, drew particular fire aimed at Presbyterians who provided leadership and Presbyterian monies that helped fund the event. Attacks by the conservative press within the church, led by The Presbyterian Layman, were targeted primarily at women staff of the denomination and, in the course of church conflict in 1994, Mary Ann Lundy, the associate director of the General Assembly Council and member of the Re-Imagining planning committee, was forced to leave her job under pressure of being fired.

The assault on Re-Imagining, Mary Ann, women staff, and all of those who dared to claim the identification of "Christian feminist" became a powerful catalyst, and the answer to our question, "Is it time for a group?" suddenly became a resounding "Yes!" Mary Kuhns, a former staff member of the church's Justice for Women Committee, and I decided to call a meeting in Louisville in October of 1994 to see if there was interest in forming a boldly-feminist group.

Seventeen people responded with their presence and many of those who couldn't attend sent their affirmations to "go for it!" Those who were contacted initially were women and men who had worked on women's issues in the church and were known to be angered by the recent backlash against the Presbyterian Church's commitment to women's advocacy. Many confirmed their desire for such a group by sending donations and pledges of financial support.

Our initial meeting was marked by an unsuppressable energy and enthusiasm for this project. We talked about a name and chose *Voices of Sophia* temporarily after several suggestions and much discussion. "The 17" called for a larger gathering which would actually organize the group in May of 1995. Fifty-seven women and men, including four ecumenical partners, responded to our invitation and came to St. Louis to participate in this new birthing. We spent a weekend singing, talking, laughing, writing, and conceiving. Again, after much discussion, we confirmed that we would be called *Voices of Sophia*.

What is our purpose?

Voices of Sophia...

is a community of women and men in the larger community of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) being reformed by God through the Spirit of the living Christ, and working toward the transformation of the church into a discipleship of equals in which:

- the gifts and voices of the *laos* form our theology and inform the directions we take;
- truth-telling in relation to the interpretation of Scripture, tradition, and human experience is essential to the community;
- we counteract the traditional absolutist and abusive male images of God;
- we hear and value individual stories;
- we provide a model for action throughout the church as we claim our power and empower others;
- we stand with women and other marginalized persons around the world, including children, whose lives are crushed by the burden of patriarchal systems;
- we are open to ecumenical communities of similar purpose and to new ways of being reformed by the wild and untamed Spirit.

Voices of Sophia is calling the church to respond to responsible theology, reclaiming the fullness of God's image, embracing the diversity of the world, and welcoming the voices of women as we enter the 21st century.

Why *Voices of Sophia*?

Our name says much about who we are. We claim our voices in expressing our faith and we celebrate the voices of women who are articulating their faith in fresh and challenging ways – feminist theologians, womanist theologians who speak out of their African-American experience, mujerista theologians who give voice to their Latina experience, and Asian feminists who speak about their experiences of faith. We believe that women have much to share about being Christian in different racial and cultural contexts. *Voices of Sophia* celebrates their scholarship, their liturgical creativity, and what for many of us has been a life-giving renewal of our faith. We want to make a large space for their voices in our church.

We reclaim the long-silenced Sophia language of our ancient biblical and theological

tradition. In the Bible, Sophia is God's Wisdom – identified with the God the Creator, with Jesus as God's Incarnate One, and with the Holy Spirit – all three. For too long, female imagery for God has been suppressed and marginalized in favor of exclusively male language. The Presbyterian Church has taken strong positions in favor of inclusive language and we call the church to continued commitment to these positions. We call the church to the consistent use of "expansive language" – giving voice to all the ways God is named in the Bible, in our tradition, and in our own experience, and recognizing that any human metaphors are limited to describing the wonder and mystery of God.

The '95 Illuminations

Voices of Sophia stands boldly in the tradition of the Reformation, calling our denomination to its own motto of being "reformed and always reforming." In the spirit of the Reformation, the idea emerged that our group should announce its convictions to the church in a manner similar to Martin Luther's postings of 95 theses. Since the year was 1995, we decided to write our '95 Theses, not necessarily 95 in number. Those coming to the St. Louis meeting in May were each asked to bring three statements or ideas for theses.

One of the primary efforts at the May gathering was to formulate the '95 theses. All of the statements were reviewed, organized around common themes, and given to small groups to refine and develop. Theses from each group were written on large sheets of newsprint and shared with the total group; ideas were shared in plenary and everyone had the opportunity to go around the room and make comments on the pages of newsprint. In discussing the theses, we decided to rename them Illuminations, lifting up a woman's voice with the term used by Hildegard of Bingen. At the end of the meeting, a small group volunteered to polish the Illuminations and prepare them in final form. Through the wonders of 20th century technology, the Illuminations were prepared in a collaborative effort and adopted following a mailing to the entire group. The '95 Illuminations were printed and 1500 copies were distributed at our church's General Assembly in July.

Our Birth Announcement

It was Sunday afternoon in Cincinnati, July 16, 1995, when *Voices of Sophia* made its first public appearance. Amidst red, jade, purple, and turquoise T-shirts, bright green Sophia buttons, and the sounds of singing, clapping, cheers and bright smiles, those attending the Presbyterian Church's annual General Assembly learned of this new organization.

As the commissioners left the plenary room, the Sophia group sang a new hymn to the tune of Luther's *Ein' Feste Berg* ("A Mighty Fortress"), written by one of its members for the occasion:

Sophia, God's own Wisdom, come!
Be here our insight and our guide.
Remove distraction's ceaseless hum,
Grant clarity, and here abide.
You offer truth and grace,
And make each common place
A sacred home for all,
A holy spot to call
Our God's eternal dwelling.

As the crowd grew into the hundreds, all eyes were drawn to a brightly painted door. I greeted the gathering with the words: "Welcome! In the spirit of the Reformation, we gather to praise Sophia-God and to announce the birth of a new organization in the Presbyterian Church that has chosen to name itself *Voices of Sophia* ." Then Mary Kuhns gave a brief background of the group and spoke about "the frustrations in recent years of those who seek justice for women and equality for all persons." As the '95 Illuminations were unrolled and taped to the door, one by one a chorus of voices read selectively from them.

Everyone was invited to a birthday party to celebrate this momentous occasion, and a parade ensued to a nearby hotel, embellished with noisemakers, bubbles streamers, drums and cheering. We sang chorus after chorus of the South African tune, "Siyahamb' ekukhanyeni kwenkhos" (We are marching in the light of God), and partied to the strains of another song written for the event: (to the tune of "Rise Up, O Men of God")

O come, Sophia, come!
Sing out with wisdom's voice,
Our music blends in prayer and praise,
While heads and heart rejoice.

O speak, Sophia, speak!
Christ's word of truth we need,
Illuminations come and go,
All measured by God's speed.

O stay, Sophia, stay!
Your guidance shows the way.
Help our community of faith
Lead toward Christ's promised day.

Where we are now...

We have a central team, eight members including one ecumenical partner, who coordinate plans and make ongoing decisions for the group. We have a newsletter, *Illuminations*, that has published two issues (four times a year). We have a growing membership of Presbyterians and interested others who want to be connected to our work. We have a private meeting on Presbynet, the Presbyterian online network. We have plans for an annual gathering in April of 1996 near Chicago. And we have plans for a presence at our next General Assembly in Albuquerque, June 29 - July 6. We are alive and well and celebrating the presence of women doing theology – of sacred feminine wisdom in its many marvelous expressions. *Voices of Sophia* is for us about truth-telling, about our faith and our model for discipleship. We offer our gifts and invite engagement in the ongoing work for love and justice.

What does this have to do with *Creating Peace*?

When I was asked to write this article about *Voices of Sophia*, I was told that the theme of this issue would be “creating peace.” It occurred to me that for some in our church, the creation of this feminist group has been anything but peaceful. First of all, it was born out of the conflict over the authority of women to name their experience, define their theological questions and convictions, and give expression to their faith as a worshiping community. The debate over Re-Imagining in the Presbyterian Church tested not only our denomination’s commitment to women and justice, but the very ties that bind the church in unity as one people. Talk of splitting the church was uppermost in the months before the 1994 General Assembly and its subsequent “reconciling” action regarding the Re-Imagining controversy.

After the summer of 1994, many in the church hoped that peace had come, which meant that they hoped that women would not disrupt the peace and unity of the church with any more gatherings like Re-Imagining. What they failed to understand is how uneasy the peace of 1994 was – and how silenced and angry were many women and men who saw a retreat from the church’s commitment to justice and equality.

So when *Voices of Sophia* announced its formation, the reaction was decidedly mixed. Members of the denomination’s executive council met with our leadership and questioned whether this group was in the best interest of the church. They even questioned whether its formation was in the best interest of women. The conservative press has identified *Voices of Sophia* as evidence of the escalating influence of Re-Imagining and an accelerating assault on traditional Christian beliefs. The peace and unity of the church is indeed disrupted, perhaps by the formation of our group, but certainly by the inflammatory depictions of it.

However, I believe that when we talk about peace and peacemaking, we need first and foremost to examine the underlying assumptions about power and privilege,

and how they are distributed among persons. True peace is possible only under conditions of shared power and the just distribution of resources. Peace is not the absence of conflict; peace is, in Hebrew understanding, *shalom*, or the wholeness and well-being of all creation.

Women do not experience shalom in many aspects of patriarchal Christianity. Justice does not characterize many of our relationships, both personally and institutionally. Justice is denied women when they dare to counter 2000 years of male-defined theology and worship; justice is denied lesbians and gay men in their very being and the participation within communities of faith. There is much cause for unrest and there is much reason to disrupt the peace. Peacefulness is not passivity. There is much work of justice to do, and it demands our passion and challenge and change. This, I believe, is how we can best create true peace.

I am reminded, when I think of peacemaking, of the Prince of Peace who said, "I come not to bring peace but a sword." While I would much prefer that Jesus had used a non-violent metaphor, I understand what he meant. Those who challenge unjust institutions on behalf of the marginalized, the excluded, and the disadvantaged upset the status quo and shake up the power arrangements. Conflict is likely to ensue, but with it comes opportunity – the opportunity for examination of how our lives are ordered and what makes for genuine peace for all.

I consider myself to be a peacemaker and I celebrate the creation of this group, *Voices of Sophia*, as a sign of peace in our church and our world. I have seen the peace that it has brought to those for whom it is a sign of hope, and I anticipate the peace that our denomination might know if justice prevailed throughout its being. The Presbyterian Church has stood boldly for peace and justice. We who belong to *Voices of Sophia* call the church to its wholehearted embrace of both.