

# **Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church**

## by Harold Gordon Porter

The Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church seeks to be a congregational model of diversity and inclusiveness. Just as importantly it seeks to model theological pluralism within a Christian commitment. At Mount Auburn, to be fully accepted, a person's sexual orientation is irrelevant. It is a congregation neither gay nor straight, but one body in Christ. An egalitarian community beyond gender, it seeks to share the burdens and the blessings of life with no behavior held up for one that is not held up for all.

Since 1991, when it adopted and implemented "The Policy for the Inclusion of Gay and Lesbian Persons," this church has experienced a spiritual depth and richness of the Christian faith not previously known. What was surprising to everyone was that this new birth of the Spirit's embracing way, a revolution in relationships, came about without rancor, division, or significant loss of membership. Instead, love became more real, unity was strengthened, and membership has more than doubled.

The Mount Auburn congregation, one of the eighty-six in the Presbytery of Cincinnati, often felt alone in its journey toward social justice in matters of sexual orientation. Its policy of inclusion was overwhelmingly judged contrary to the standards of the Presbyterian denomination regarding gays and lesbians. However, in a denomination that still resists the full acceptance of non-heterosexual persons, Mount Auburn has become one of the denomination's most vital joyous congregations.

### **The Historical Context**

Mount Auburn had no special gifts to become an inclusive church. Its long history, typical of many Presbyterian churches, was of a healthy conservatism. It was progressive, but not radical in its Christian witness. In 1868, it was one of the first churches built up the hill from Cincinnati's densely populated riverfront basin. Organized in the suburbs (today it would be considered inner city), its first members built a beautiful sanctuary adorned with Tiffany windows, and provided it with a powerful pipe organ. The founders, and those who worshipped in the church on the hill for the first hundred years, were upper middle class.

After world War II, as the city expanded and people moved out to new suburbs, the church began to lose members. In the 1960s, with racial tensions high, "white flight" occurred in the immediate church neighborhood. There was some effort to welcome the incoming African-American people who moved into the neighborhood, and a number who joined at that time remain active today. But the future appeared bleak, and the leadership prepared to turn its large church plant over to the Presbytery for its headquarters, with the remaining members continuing only as a worshipping community. At the last minute this plan was discarded, even though by then only a few of the members lived in the Mount Auburn neighborhood. Over the next ten years from 1972 to 1982, during the ministry of the Reverend Laten Carter, the church was able to stabilize. The congregation decided to stay and create an appropriate ministry.

Other institutions in the area helped to stabilize the church. With the University of Cincinnati a few blocks away and nine major hospitals nearby, there were significant possibilities for ministry.

In 1983, when I was called to the church, there were 224 members on the rolls and far less than half of that number attending worship. The congregation had begun to wrestle with a new mission statement. Mount Auburn had two special assets at that time:

# Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church

1. Its beautiful sanctuary and large education building, and
2. An endowment of \$700,000.

But if the church was to survive, it was apparent that Mount Auburn needed to become more than a neighborhood church. The nearby Methodist, American Baptist, Episcopal, United Church of Christ, and two Roman Catholic Churches were all in great decline. Still, many in the congregation had the mindset to hold on to the status quo and were reluctant to risk any radical change.

## Vision for Change

It is my belief that a pastor must not only have a vision of what a local church could do to foster and enlarge its ministry (given the congregation's gifts and location), but, more importantly, be the primary theologian-in-residence. By this I mean: the pastor is to think about anything and everything from a Christian perspective. Theological renewal was essential, and it became our priority as a way to serve the Realm of God for this world. We decided we must also move beyond the traditional theology that had dominated the church for over a century and had become too outdated to be compelling for people in our time and place.

We realized that the church, when it was most vital, was a counterculture agency with a love for the world. Its mission, as was Jesus', was to enlist itself in shaping the world with the unbounded love of God who is in the world, not out of it. "Being for the world and not against it" would be our agenda.

To accomplish this, a more progressive theology was needed – a theology that is open-ended. Theology needs to be open-ended because it is focused on God who is a living, creative, dynamic being, not captured by the scriptures or our historical creeds. "The Spirit flows free, high surging where it will," and we were ready to move with it.

## Theology, Faith, Justice

We began with theology. The first focus was the profession of faith asked of all who joined Mount Auburn. We felt it necessary to move beyond what had become normative in the church, "Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?" At Mount Auburn we agreed to ask instead, "Will you serve God as revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus?" We wished to acknowledge that above all it is *God* we would serve – a theocentric creed – realizing, as Paul Tillich taught, that God is *more* than the God we worship!

Still, the compelling reference to God for us was the life and ministry of Jesus who differs from us in faithfulness, but not in human experience. We understood Jesus as the breakthrough in history, exemplifying most clearly the pure unbounded love of God for the whole world. He was essential to us, at the center of our faith, but knowing God was even greater than the reality and message of Jesus. God was in all things and all persons.

Two other guidelines were then agreed upon. Both were statements of a process rather than creedal affirmations:

- Faith is to be exposed to reason, and reason enlarged by faith.
- It is not a question for us *if* the church should be involved in the social, political, and

# Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church

economic orders of life, but only a question of *how*.

Thus the world became our parish, including, but not limited to, the neighborhood. We lifted up the two most spiritual concerns of the scripture – justice and love – which faith weds together. It seemed clear to us that Jesus himself judged scripture by the critique of Micah 6:8, that we are required to live achieving justice, applying love to all things, and walking in faith humbly before God.

## Community Outreach Through Shared Space

We next applied our theological understanding to our building. Our large properties, with many unused spaces, would be used to serve as justice and well-being centers for our community as well as the world. Groups that needed a location to voice and implement such concerns were invited to be housed here. During the next decade the following groups had their offices at Mount Auburn Church:

- Nuclear FREEZE Campaign
- The League of Women Voters
- Amnesty International
- Center for Peace Education
- The American Civil Liberties Union
- University of Cincinnati Child Care Center
- Woman’s City Club (a social justice advocacy group)
- Physicians for Social Responsibility
- Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG)
- Family Care Network (a support group for families with premature babies)
- Cincinnati Youth Group (teenage lesbians and gays)
- Ecumenical Campus Ministries (University of Cincinnati)

By opening our space we attracted new members to our congregation who were justice-oriented. The congregation worked with and alongside community groups as well as developing its own stance, demonstrating openly for justice on many issues in our city and worldwide. When the nearby Planned Parenthood’s building was firebombed and destroyed, we hosted the city’s response to this tragedy. We continue to be the center in our city that celebrates procreative choice. Many other issues, demanding the attention of justice, drew our involvement.

Acknowledging our building as an integral part of our witness, we next began a building renovation campaign to make our buildings, with their six irregular levels, accessible to all. Beyond the funds raised in our campaign, “That All May Freely Enter”, we spent a significant portion of our endowment. A result of making our plant fully handicap-accessible was a far greater use of our sanctuary. A later renovation of the chancel provided opportunity and space for a variety of new activities that the auditorium-type structure did not afford. Our buildings said, “Welcome to all!”

# Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church

## Open Communion and Inclusive Community

The next theological issue of renewal to occupy us was the meaning Holy Communion. The table, with Jesus as its host, certainly had influenced our membership commitment and the inviting way we would use our facilities, but we needed to be clearer about this sacrament's unique and radical nature.

It became apparent to us that even the Presbyterian Church, with its broad and ecumenical invitation to the communion table, had still placed a "fence" around communion. In the Presbyterian Church, only believers are to be invited, and only "the baptized faithful" at that. It was, for many, a barrier to the grace it afforded. This seemed to us most inhospitable and contrary to Jesus' own table manners. He willingly dined with anyone. For our church to open its doors to all, but in the course of the service declare that we will now partake of this special meal, cautioning those present if they were not a believer to please refrain, seemed not only bad manners but contrary to Jesus' grand invitation. He, after all, is the host for the meal.

After this study, and declaring communion was to be open to all, the session decided in 1989 to send an overture to the Presbytery to amend the denomination's constitution, "to make it clear that all persons who are present when the Lord's Supper is celebrated are welcomed to participate in this meal, baptized or not, Christian or not, child or adult." This overture, which caused considerable debate, was narrowly defeated in the Presbytery of Cincinnati, with a vote of seventy-three in favor, ninety-six opposed. Nevertheless, Mount Auburn continues the practice and is in the process of improving the wording of the overture and resubmitting it to the Presbytery.

Our new policy, 'A Table Set for All,' became the central focus of our witness, bringing the richest experience of God's unbounded love, focusing clearly the ministry before us. The table at the center of our sanctuary became again what it originally was – the ultimate symbol of the Christian faith, the means to grace, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet. For some who had not previously felt Jesus' invitation was for them, it has led to baptism and church membership. But for all, it has meant they are welcomed, affirmed, and loved. We had come a long way in renewing our theological foundation. We would:

- Celebrate open communion
- Affirm the biblical witness that all persons are made in the image of God
- Lift up Jesus' teaching that all are called, all are chosen
- Be about love, but not at the expense of justice
- Lift up compassion above the concern for purity
- Seek to be an inclusive community.

## Becoming More Inclusive: Justice and Sexual Orientation

From these understandings, our next policy development – "The Inclusion of Gays and Lesbians" – naturally followed. This policy, formulated in 1991, reads, in part:

Acknowledging that the reality of prejudice in the church and society gives gay and lesbian persons reason for uncertainty as to their reception, we of the Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church wish to make clear our real and genuine welcome of all persons. We affirm that gay and lesbian persons are part of God's good creation and that they, no less

# Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church

than heterosexual persons, are meant to enjoy God's gifts of love, joy, and intimacy. All who seek and receive God's love are welcomed as full participants in the life and worship of Christ's church without having to deny or hide their sexual orientation. Therefore, we are gratefully open to the service and leadership of gay and lesbian persons including those called to ordained positions in our congregation.

Our loving welcome is unconditional. We further affirm our commitment, along with the General Assembly of our church, to full civil rights and justice for all persons, regardless of sexual orientation, in society and in the church. We will continue to seek more light on the ways in which we can offer our support and our love to all the children of God.<sup>1</sup>

I had tears in my eyes as our Church and Society Committee first read these words to our session. I felt a sense of liberation from my own homophobia. It felt more honest to be in the Christian church.

The session approved the policy and went further to state that in contrast to the policy of the Presbyterian denomination, Mount Auburn Church would not abide by any rule in our denomination that abuses or demeans gay and lesbian persons or in any way treats them as less than heterosexual persons. Although our denomination had not made it explicit in its constitution, the "definitive guidance" promulgated in 1978 and affirmed to this day had declared gay and lesbian sexual behavior, regardless if it were mutual, faithful, and loving, to be sinful. The denomination permits homosexual persons to be received as members in the church, but the denomination excludes them from leadership at any level.

At Mount Auburn we are convinced that this is an offense to the Christian gospel. For us there would be no compromise on this issue. We would identify with those treated as the least in our congregation and as outcasts in our society. We could not serve the unity of the church, even one so democratically constructed as the Presbyterian Church, at the expense of the gospel it is meant to serve. We clearly understood our policy would be perceived by the denomination as ecclesiastical disobedience, but we felt it was the denomination that had the faulty position. Even though we believed strongly in the polity of the Presbyterian Church and had no desire to leave it, we would not become anxious about our future in it. We knew that we must stand uncompromisingly with homosexual persons or they would not feel welcomed at our table. They would know that our invitation to find their place at our "Table Set for All" was only a hollow gesture.

Not surprisingly, we were first motivated to address this issue solely on the simple matter of justice, regardless of how comfortable we were with this minority's sexuality. When the denomination released its second and positive study of this matter, "The Human Sexuality Report of 1990," we did what all churches were asked to do. We studied it. Prior to our study and formulating our policy of inclusion, we were not even aware of any gay or lesbian persons in our congregation! But when we adopted our policy and published it extensively, making it clear that the table in the center of our sanctuary was truly open to all, members unashamedly began to share their family histories, telling of brothers, sisters, children, and other relatives and friends who were homosexual. They were simply overjoyed to feel the full embrace of a Christian congregation for those they truly loved.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Inclusion of Gays and Lesbians," a policy adopted by the session of Mt Auburn Presbyterian Church, Cincinnati, Ohio, on December 19, 1991, and reaffirmed every year thereafter.

# Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church

We had come to the just and liberating position, so well summarized by the biblical scholar, L. William Countryman, in his book, *Dirt, Greed and Sex*:

Homosexual orientation has been increasingly recognized in our time as a given of human sexuality. While most people feel some sexual attraction to members of both the same and opposite sex and, in the majority of these, attraction to the opposite sex dominates, there is a sizable minority for whom sexual attraction to persons of the same sex is a decisive shaping factor of their sexual lives. It appears that this orientation is normally inalterable and that there is no strong internal reason for the homosexual person to wish to alter it. To deny an entire class of human beings the right, peaceably and without harming others, to pursue the kind of sexuality that corresponds to their nature is a perversion of the Gospel.<sup>2</sup>

## Ecclesiastical Response

What, then, has been the consequence of our policy since it was fully implemented in 1992? Shortly thereafter, the Presbytery of Cincinnati found our policy to be “irregular”. They ruled the session had made an erroneous decision. In effect, our policy was not Christian! The Presbytery’s vote on November 10, 1992, was 162 to 75 against the policy of Mount Auburn Church. We were ordered to prayerfully reconsider it and to change it. We prayerfully did reconsider it, and unanimously reaffirmed it.

In reaction to our noncompliance, the Presbytery, on May 11, 1993, by a vote of ninety-five to ninety-four, approved an Administrative Commission “to inquire into and resolve” our alleged delinquency. Mount Auburn Church delayed the start of the Commission’s study by appealing to the Synod, and then the General Assembly, that such an administrative commission was itself an irregular means of addressing our policy, preferring a judicial review process instead. The Synod and General Assembly sided with the Presbytery stating that presbyteries have broad latitude as to when and why to establish such a commission to inquire into its churches. However they stated that neither of these higher bodies decided for or against the substance of our policy, and also warned the Presbytery that any action brought against Mount Auburn might be grounds for Mount Auburn Church to register a complaint against the Presbytery.

The Administrative Commission did come to Mount Auburn, and for nearly a year fully investigated the pastor, session, and congregation. They found Mount Auburn to be a growing and unified congregation, much, I am sure, to the surprise of some members of the Commission and a majority of the Presbytery. The Commission finally decided, “until the constitutional discrepancies [on this issue] are clearly resolved by the General Assembly, no disciplinary action be taken against the Mount Auburn Session and Pastor,” and they added, “To take action at this time would destroy the spirit of a vital congregation that will not be moved from its position.”<sup>3</sup>

As of this moment, even though the Presbytery still considers Mount Auburn “irregular and delinquent,” and has ordered us to rescind our policy, no ecclesiastical action against the church is presently occurring. Since the Commission’s decision, two General Assemblies (1996 and 1997) have come and gone. While the denomination’s original antigay policy is still intact and

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<sup>2</sup> L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 244.

<sup>3</sup> Presbytery Commission, “Report of the Presbytery of Cincinnati Administrative Commission on Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church,” 13 January 1996.

# Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church

has been hardened, constitutional confusion over this issue remains. While some churches are still facing disciplinary action as to their inclusion policy, Mount Auburn continues even more aggressively to welcome gay and lesbian persons, and to ordain them as deacons and elders when elected by the congregation. We continue to perform same-sex covenant unions which, for us, have the same spiritual meaning as marriage.

## An Ever-widening Inclusiveness

Mount Auburn realizes it is not alone in this struggle. In the Presbyterian denomination we are part of a growing number of churches (eighty-six churches at the time of this writing) that have developed similar inclusive policies of “welcoming all.” In the Presbyterian denomination we are referred to as “More Light” congregations. There are also inclusive churches in other denominations. Let me list identifying names in other denominations:

“Reconciling Churches”	United Methodist
“Open and Affirming”	United Church of Christ
“Open and Affirming”	Disciples of Christ
“Reconciled in Christ”	Evangelical Lutheran
“Welcoming and Affirming”	American Baptist
“Supportive Churches”	Church of the Brethren
“Supportive Churches”	Mennonite Churches
“Affirming Churches”	United Church of Canada
“Integrity Churches”	Episcopal Church

Also, there are groups in the Roman Catholic faith community called “Dignity.”

I am sure the members in all of these churches have found, as we have, that it is a joy and a blessing to repent of judgmental exclusion. Such repentance occurs whenever hearts are warmed by the person of Jesus who has enabled love between men and women, women and women, and men and men. Once having become inclusive, these churches are not likely to decide again to become exclusive. They have experienced something similar to the Apostle Peter who repented from his conviction that gentiles were unclean and should be excluded. “God gave them the same gifts God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God” (Acts 11 :17). This story in Acts, Chapter 11, reveals how the church has been struggling to become more inclusive since its earliest years.

## What We Have Learned

There are continuing positive consequences from Mount Auburn’s repentance and affirmation. *First*, there are healthy differences of opinion in our congregation, but no division. We lost only a few members since declaring that gay and lesbian persons are a part of God’s good creation and that they, no less than heterosexual persons, are meant to enjoy God’s gifts of love, joy, and intimacy. The congregation remains healthy and united and the rewards, more than we could have imagined, have been remarkable. Most evident has been the evangelistic vitality of this congregation. In the six years since adopting our policy our *average* attendance at worship has doubled, to over two hundred. We have received 223 new members since adopting our policy

# Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church

Of those persons who have joined, approximately one-third are gay or lesbian. Unfortunately, while they are open to our congregation many still feel they must be closeted to their families and employers.

*Second*, we have learned that most gay and lesbian persons don't want to be part of a "gay" church. They prefer an inclusive and diverse church such as the Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church has declared itself to be. Simply because most denominations are closed to them, many gay and lesbian persons remain unchurched. Every week at Mount Auburn someone comes to my office to say, "I never thought I had a place in the church, nor have I thought I would seek membership, but here I am."

*Third*, the great gifts that this marginalized and abused community has brought to our congregation, especially their commitment to the Christian faith, has enriched us beyond measure. We are blessed indeed by those who come with their talents and life experiences from all levels of life's vocations. Several would be clergy if permitted. Many are outstanding persons in business, university, and professions. Their skills and maturity have made this church much more effective in its community ministry.

I mention the facts regarding growth for one primary purpose. Most churches are simply afraid to openly embrace those of a different sexual orientation because they fear a split in the congregation or a loss of members. But it is a groundless fear. Familiarity with gay and lesbian persons brings the opposite of contempt. It can bring understanding and reconciliation. It is surprising how powerful the gospel of acceptance is when tried and experienced.

In his recent book, *Reclaiming the Church: Where the Mainline Churches Went Wrong and What to Do About It*, John Cobb, one of our country's most eminent Protestant theologians, describes a vital congregation as one that is culturally engaged with the most pressing issues demanding justice today.<sup>4</sup> Certainly one of the most prominent social justice issues before us today, as this twentieth century winds down, is the maltreatment of homosexual persons. For the church of Christ to support this prejudice is the sin. For the church to become truly inclusive is the future in Christ.

The **Reverend Dr. Harold Gordon Porter** is Pastor of Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati. He is a member of the Executive Board of the Metropolitan Area Religious Coalition of Cincinnati, and a member of the Executive Committee of the More Light Church Network. He is a leader in ecumenical relations in Cincinnati.

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The Mount Auburn church is one of three More Light churches described in the book. The others are Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church, both in New York City.

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<sup>4</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr., *Reclaiming the Church* [Louisville: Westminster John Know Press, 1997], 3, 43.