

Address to the Presbytery of San Francisco, January 14, 2003

by Erin K. Swenson.

I bring you greetings from the Board of More Light Presbyterians, and from the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, a place deep within the embrace of southern culture, the very place where the first Presbyterian minister who is transgender had her ordination sustained and her ministry affirmed. I am that minister, a member in good standing of my presbytery, parish associate of the Ormewood Park Presbyterian Church, and founder of the Southern Association for Gender Education, a non-profit organization devoted exclusively to the task of educating our church and our community about the reality of gender diversity.

Ministry in our respective communities is a daunting task. Help me for a moment. How many people here have gender? [pause] If you didn't just raise your hand I need to speak with you after the meeting. It's clear that when the topic of gender identity is on the table we all have something at stake for we all must deal with what it means to be gendered as male or female. So when I speak of myself as transgender, or Gwen Araujo, one of Newark's youth recently murdered because she was transgender, I am talking about a subject that in one way or another effects us all.

Most of us are lucky. In the words of Presbyterian minister Mister Fred Rogers, we are born male, feel like boys and men, and are attracted to females. Or, we are born female, feel like girls and women, and are attracted to boys. For the small, but very real, number of us for whom this does not happen the world becomes a dangerous place filled with ridicule, rejection, and violence. Gwen felt that violence a few months ago at the hands of supposed friends. A violence bred, I believe, in the determined ignorance of our churches and communities who refuse to face the reality of gender and its diverse expressions, preferring to enforce artificial gender expectations on children already overstressed with the task of growing up. Gwen was an attractive, outgoing, 17-year-old transgender young woman, excited about life and her future. What a contrast when I think of myself at that age, a boy painfully shy and withdrawn, dangerously depressed, and wracked with guilt over my own gender confusion. I felt violent toward myself; Gwen experienced the violence of others. And in a way the perpetrators of the Gwen's murder, children all, are as much victims as Gwen and I, their lives destroyed by the fear and ignorance we all share.

How does one speak rationally in this world about such a pervasive and yet little understood topic as gender identity? Embedded deep within the fabric of our society are assumptions about what it means to be male or female that lie at the bedrock of our cultural institutions, most especially the church. The first words we hear in life are a fateful pronouncement of this reality. "It's a boy!" or "it's a girl!" comes the blessing. A blessing, that is, if your sense of being a boy or a girl, a man or a woman, fits the label given. And woe unto you if even this pronouncement, this first category, cannot be established because some twist of biology has caused your anatomical sex to be indeterminate. We are only now beginning to resist our corporate temptation to surgically - violently - impress an acceptable gender onto the bodies of these intersex infants, a way

of assuaging our anxiety over our compulsive need for them to be clearly gendered as either male or female.

It's a daunting task as Christians, to change the world's perception- "neither male nor female," from God's perspective. Like the religious people of biblical times, we resist overcoming boundaries: clean and unclean, welcomed and outcast, male and female. But then that's exactly what a poor carpenter's son from Nazareth asked of us.

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