

**A Liberal Church That Talks About Jesus**, The VOS Journal, Special Issue, Vol. 3,  
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Keynote by Susan Boyer

I want to start with a few disclaimers. First, when the invitation came to the staff of the La Verne Church of the Brethren (LVCoB) to lead this gathering on the theme, "What does it mean to be a progressive Church of the Brethren," Janet Ober, our associate pastor said, "Location, location, location."

At La Verne, we live on the frontier. We live in an urban setting. We live among some of the most amazing diversity. It is easier to be progressive where we live than where some of you live. We know that. We are not suggesting you become like us.

We agreed to come and lead this weekend, but we want to be very clear that we don't think we are the model of what it means to be a progressive Church of the Brethren. We are one example, and while we will be sharing with you this weekend some of the things we do and the way we do them, they may or may not work in your setting. Location, location, location.

Second, one woman in the La Verne church said to me just last week about this gathering, "Aren't you just preaching to the choir?" I told her that was the wrong metaphor. We didn't come to preach. A better metaphor is that all of us here are the choir together, and we are lifting our voices together because we make a more beautiful sound that way. I hope we all walk away from this weekend with new energy, new ideas, and new enthusiasm for what it means to be followers of the way of Jesus.

Third, the term progressive is troubling for some. All language, when we get into this conversation, has its problems – liberal, conservative, evangelical, etc. One member of the La Verne Church hates to hear us call ourselves progressive because it makes him think of the progressive Brethren who split from the Church of the Brethren in the late 1800's and who are not much more conservative than our branch of the Brethren. Another member of the church hates the word progressive because of a radio station in Southern California that calls itself "progressive radio," uses lewd language and puts down women. Progressive is obviously not a perfect word. Progressive is a term we use to try and get at who we are. It is our chosen word for now, and much of my effort up in this speech will be to help define progressive for our time and our Church of the Brethren setting.

So, now that I have my disclaimers out of the way – and before we get into the meat of what it means to be progressive – let me tell you a bit about La Verne's context. The La Verne Congregation is in the Pacific Southwest District of the Church of the Brethren. That includes all of California and Arizona. We have approximately 30 churches. La Verne has the largest worship attendance in its district – an average of just under 300 each Sunday.

If any of you have seen the La Verne church, you know it is an impressive structure – constructed of cement and very gothic looking. It was built in many stages, but the sanctuary was dedicated in 1930 – erected by the sweat of the members during the

Great Depression. It has an incredible pipe organ and the largest seating capacity in the town of La Verne. People know the LVCoB for, if nothing else, its architecture.

The congregation has deep roots in its community. The Brethren-related University of La Verne is two blocks from the church. Hillcrest, the Church of the Brethren retirement community, is less than a mile away. Three of the five elected members to the city council have ties to the La Verne church.

Partly because of its connection to an academic setting, the La Verne church historically, has been more liberal than most other Churches of the Brethren. Looking back, you see that women got a say at congregational business meetings earlier than other settings. La Verne used musical instruments before many other congregations. Traditional dress was dropped sooner than in other places.

In the Pacific Southwest District, La Verne is known as the liberal congregation. It speaks out for inclusion of LGBT brothers and sisters. It worked with the farm workers. It offered an amazing act of accompaniment with Muslim children following 9/11. It sent a query to the district asking for a study to be done on our denominational name. These are just a few of the things it has done to earn its reputation as liberal.

I don't want to dwell too much on our history and context, but I wanted to give you our setting, because I am sure that in many ways your setting is different. It is location, location, location. You have your own context. You may have a liberal church in a rural setting. You may be a lone voice or viewpoint in an otherwise very traditional church setting. You may come from a Church of the Brethren that is more progressive than we are. This weekend we embrace each other in our own particular settings and hear from each other. It's all good.

What does progressive mean? I have been asked that many times. When Nancy Faus joined the VOS Steering Committee she was perplexed by the use of that word and said, "I hope you define it before we get started at the Fall Gathering." I tried to explain that to define the word progressive too strictly would be to go against exactly what it means to be progressive. But I am going to make a stab at it, using several sources that have been very helpful for me.

Jim Burklo, author of *Open Christianity: Home By Another Road* (Bend, OR: Rising Star Press, 2000), spoke at a VOS workshop in Modesto a couple years ago. He said that Evangelical Christians want to know, "What do you believe?" Progressive Christians, he says, ask instead "How do you experience God?"

Charles Bayer, a scholar in the Disciples of Christ tradition, says that much of the Christian church today understands Christianity as a way of praising Jesus. He juxtaposes that to progressive Christians who understand Christianity as a way of following Jesus.

Here are some more differences. More conservative groups speak of the need to believe that which is unbelievable. Progressive Christians focus on loving the unlovable. The

author Marcus Borg says conservative Christians would say that Christianity is the religion about Jesus, but he believes that Christianity is the religion of Jesus.

One of the groups that is helping define progressive Christianity is called The Center for Progressive Christianity (TCPC). They are on the web at [www.tcpc.org](http://www.tcpc.org). TCPC is not really a center. It is mostly a website that helps link progressive Christians with a church home. They have eight points that help define what it means to be progressive. Your church can join TCPC and then put your name and location on the website, and as progressives move to new communities they can find you. The Church of the Brethren has only one church, currently on [www.tcpc.org](http://www.tcpc.org). That is the Open Door Church in Minnesota. You can also join TCPC as an individual. (Since this speech was given the LVCoB has joined TCPC.)

I want to share with you the eight points of TCPC as a framework for defining progressive Christianity. However, I should tell you that these eight points are not creedal for TCPC. To join, you do not have to adhere to their eight points. You can write your own statement. In fact, one church adopted their eight points by turning all of them into questions. Further, TCPC's eight points have changed over time.

***Point #1: By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus.***

TCPC put this point in to reclaim Jesus. Progressives are not Christians who have gotten rid of Jesus. However, we do understand Jesus in a very different way than our conservative brothers and sisters. As Charles Bayer says, we strive to follow him, not praise him. We take the teachings of Jesus seriously. So when Jesus is asked, "What is the greatest of all commandments?" we take his answer very seriously. When Jesus gets up in the synagogue in his hometown to preach his first sermon, we listen carefully. When Jesus is willing to die on a cross, we ask, "What could make him do such a thing?"

How we read the Bible does show the marked difference between conservatives and progressives. We look for meaning through metaphor, myth and poetry because the Bible is full of these things. To love the Bible is to love these things. Anita Fast wrote in the Spring 2004 issue of BMC Dialogue (a publication of the Brethren and Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Interests): *"I learned to read the Bible as an invitation into a world brought into focus through God, Jesus Christ, and the community of believers. It wasn't primarily a book of proscriptive rules telling me to do some things and not others, but a book of descriptive stories asking me to explore, to 'come and see' for myself. In other words, I learned to have a mutual relationship with the Bible and not a dictatorial one . . . Progressive Christians do not believe that the Bible is book of facts, but a book about greater truths."*

***Point #2: By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us.***

Jim Burklo says that there are basically three ways that Christians relate to other faiths: a) exclusivism – we are right and they are wrong;; b) inclusivism – many religions are profound and beautiful, yet they all point to my religion, which is the best; c) pluralism – my religion is wonderful, and it is not the only religion that saves.

Point #2 is a pluralistic statement. Progressive Christians do not usually go around quoting “I am the way and the truth and the life. There is no other way to the Father except through me.”

**Point #3: By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus’ name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God’s feast for all peoples.**

Interestingly enough, a LVCoB Sunday School class is just finishing a six-week study on the TCPC eight points, and this one was the most troubling for many. I find communion to be a sticking point in many of my ecumenical discussions. Brethren are not sacramental people and have a different understanding of communion than many. While some of that may have been part of the discussion at LVCoB, the major reason TCPC included this point was to speak of open communion. Progressive churches never have closed communion. Everyone is welcome at the table, literally.

**Point #4: By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable (including but not limited to): believers and agnostics, conventional Christians and questioning skeptics, women and men, those of all sexual orientations and gender identities, those of all races and cultures, those of all classes and abilities, those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope.**

A major defining ingredient of progressives is a true welcome to all to participate in the life of the congregation. The La Verne Church of the Brethren has a welcome statement that appears in our bulletin every Sunday:

*As a Christian community, called by Christ to be inclusive, caring and peace-minded, we affirm that people of any race, ethnic identity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, economic status, faith tradition, or life situation, are welcome in our congregation.*

Recently, a woman came to our congregation and told me that our welcome statement made all the difference in the world to her. She has a gay son, and there are some life situations where she fears judgment. A true welcome to her was absolutely essential and was apparent at our church. I find that the LVCoB is a safe place to grow and discern. There is an undergirding ethos of invitation and acceptance in our church.

**Point #5: By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe.**

Our word is as good as our bond. Our greatest sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, is our example. Deeds are more important than creeds.

**Point #6: By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes.**

Wendell Berry in an article in the September 20, 2005 edition of *The Christian Century* called "The Burden of the Gospels" writes: *My reading of the Gospels, comforting and clarifying and instructive as they frequently are, deeply moving or exhilarating as they frequently are, has caused me to understand them also as a burden, sometimes raising the hardest of person questions, sometimes bewildering, sometimes contradictory, sometimes apparently outrageous in their demands . . . The gospels present us with peculiar questions, ones that we can't escape and can't really answer.*

At least twice in the last several years, a member of the La Verne CoB has put together a 3-4 week series called "Dare to Disturb Us." She has asked different members with different takes on theology to come and share something that others might find a bit disturbing. It has been widely successful. Progressives love to process and think and be challenged in their faith and faithfulness.

However, I do think we have some absolutes. Some answers. Recently, I read Leland Wilson's book: *Living with Beauty*. Leland is a former pastor at the LVCoB and he writes about the La Verne Church: *Sometimes, I hear the members of our church speak to new people or to neighbors about our church . . . Occasionally, one of them, with great enthusiasm, will say something like "at our church you just believe what you want to. Everyone does his or her own thing, because we don't have a creed. You can just be where you want to be." I like the enthusiasm of such a person. And I am glad for the freedom that such a member feels. But in the secret places of my mind, I cringe just a bit. I believe we do have a fairly clear teaching and an identifiable body of belief. We are not the Woodstock of faith. We are not a theological grab bag. To have no creed but the New Testament does not mean we are devoid of teaching. It simply gives us a dynamic and an open system of belief, rather than one that is fixed and closed.*

I think progressives do have some answers. God is love. We are called first and foremost to love God, others, and ourselves – and that requires our service. The Bible is a book to be read and kept open. We weight scripture. Everyone does it, progressives admit it. When Jesus was asked "What is the greatest commandment of all?" he did not say, "All the commandments are of equal importance." He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment and the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments." Jesus weighed these two commandments as heavier than the rest of scripture.

Jim Burklo says he is often accused of being a "cafeteria" Christian – someone who picks and chooses what part of the Bible to accept. He says that everyone is a cafeteria Christian but he prefers to call himself a "Great Banquet" Christian.

***Point #7: By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do: striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers.***

I would hope that the majority of Churches of the Brethren could claim this point about the importance of service and the willingness to get our hands dirty in the struggle for peace and justice.

***Point #8: By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails selfless love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.***

This point was included specifically to remind people that the journey is costly. It isn't anything goes. It isn't a religion about making you happy. Progressive Christianity follows Jesus – a radical, counter-culture figure who calls us to places of great personal sacrifice.

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Now, that gives us a framework for defining progressive. I hope it helps put some things in context. But now that I am done with that, I want to do some preaching.

A week ago I went out to breakfast with an ecumenical group of which I am part. We take turns making presentations to the group about something for which we have passion. The member who presented this monthly is part of a progressive group in LA that has decided that the first thing they need to do in their fledgling stages is to create a Statement of Faith. He had pages of suggestions and drafts and had obviously worked very hard but I found myself completely uninterested in the process. In fact, it kind of offended me. It wasn't so much that it felt creedal, although there was some of that for me. I wondered why we always have to agree on meaning before we get to action. I asked that question and said, "I thought this was the Progressive **movement**."

I have no time, energy, or patience to sit around with thinking progressives as we talk about all our questions. Sometimes I think people hide out in the progressive movement because it is kind of a heady place, it doesn't require too much work because we are always discerning. Yes, this criticism of progressives can be made. We are listening to every voice and loving everyone and maybe we aren't enough of a movement.

When I see images of people dying in Iraq, I have no patience for more joy in the questions than in the answers. When I read the suicide rate among gay teens I want to speak some absolutes. When I hear my president preaching "empire" theology I want to impeach him on the spot.

We have some powerful answers, folks. We have some important truths to speak. So while we are open and loving and accepting and good listeners, we also better be loud voices for peace, justice, equality, opportunity, and solidarity.

And for me, those truths come right out of the life and teachings of Jesus – this counter-culture figure who spoke incredible truths to power, loved the marginalized, ate with everyone, and put his life on the line and then he called others to do the same. Jesus didn't create a statement of faith. Jesus created a movement of truth.

As you may have noticed my title is "A Progressive Church that talks about Jesus." I realized as I was working on what I wanted to say to you that I don't just want us to talk about Jesus. My hope, my prayer, my passion is that the La Verne Church of the Brethren be a liberal church that follows Jesus, that we become best known, not for our impressive architecture, but for being followers of the radical Jesus who called us to be love-abiding people.

Months ago, a woman who was visiting our congregation on a Sunday morning said, "You make me want to read by Bible again." I said, "Hallelujah!" But I have to say to all of you, the staff of the La Verne Church of the Brethren is working towards having our visitors say to us, "Wow, you make me want to follow Jesus."

(This article was retyped by Julie Heisey 4-2-08. Any errors in the text are hers.)