Inside: letter from your editor, Words for Friends, and reflections on LGBTQ issues in the church, loving those in grief, racism, disability and embrace, and other perspectives on the margins.
To the APTS Community:

Welcome to the second “Crossing the Line” issue of Kairos. As with the last issue, this issue will introduce perspectives on those in the margins of the church and society. Each of the contributors writes from their own personal experience and applies that experience toward a vision of what church could be.

Earlier this week, I sat reading through the PCUSA Book of Order to prepare for a Polity take home exam. One section of the book describes the Marks of the Church: Unity, Holiness, Catholicity, and Apostolicity. It was interesting to me that, while other sections describe what the church should work towards, these elements were identified as the inherent nature of the church.

I thought about this Kairos theme while I was pondering the idea that the church is inherent one, diverse community. There are those whom we, for whatever reason, avoid or ignore in the church. Those who we relegate to the margins. But they are just as much a part of the Church as anyone else.

It seems to me, then, that our responsibility as church leaders and Christians is not to make the Church more united or more diverse. Rather, it is incumbent upon us to recognize that the Church already is these things, and to live in response to that truth by making sure that all of the voices within the Church are heard and embraced and celebrated.

These articles and essays from our classmates each remind us of a voice that is a part of our Church body and which needs to be celebrated. As a whole, let these pieces also remind us that for every silenced voice we’re made aware of, there are so many more that continue without voice, unnoticed and unheard and unsupported. May we keep our eyes, ears, and hearts open to these sisters and brothers of ours so that we may one day see the Church as God sees it: united, holy, Catholic, and apostolic.

Layton Williams, Editor

KAIROS KOFFEE HOUR

Join the Kairos Staff and the Think Tank for a monthly informal conversation about topics raised in and related to the most recent issues of Kairos. Bring your questions, insights, thoughts, and any other sort of response and help us keep the conversation going.

Wednesday, March 27th
4:00 PM
Stotts Dining Hall

(Kairos Logo designed by Jo Kretzler)

(KCover photo of Annanda Barclay and Amy Wilson-Stayton attending the UN’s Commission on the Status of Women in New York)

KAIROS THEME FOR APRIL:
The theme for the next two issues of Kairos will be “The Practical Side” and will include pieces from community members about all things related to the logistics of life as a seminarian, minister, or family member. Acceptable topics include health and wellness, spiritual self-care, technology, academics, and much more. We are especially looking for pieces with tangible value (ie. a recipe, an exercise routine, study advice, etc. If you are AT ALL interested in contributing something or have thoughts, email the editor (see back page for more info on contributing).
CONGRATULATIONS to Sabrina Jennings and her partner, Lauren Carpenter, on their wedding on Sunday, March 24, 2013 in Comfort, Texas.
We’re perfectionists when it comes to creating community. There’s just no way around it. We want to sit down over the blueprints of our community, making sure the plans are spacious but not too open; intimate but not too cramped. It has to be beautiful, but not pretentious. We’re very careful about drawing boundary lines. Strong fences make good neighbors, after all. I don’t mean to suggest that we as a church don’t create loving, positive, life-affirming communities. I’m saying that we often forget how, and need people to teach us again and again that God’s blueprints have no walls or ceilings.

Several weeks ago, I helped conduct a workshop for children with visual impairment. The subject of the workshop was "Looking Good", and ostensibly focused on educating blind youth about physical, mental, and emotional well-being. The students, many of whom were from small towns not equipped to work with people with vision problems, were given the full expanse of all the healthy and wonderful things in Austin. They were taken to a hair salon, where they could select their own hairstyle. Local culinary students cooked dinner for them, trainers worked with them in the gym, and even our neighbors the Wheatsville Co-Op did a workshop on the importance of nutrition.

By the time my portion of the workshop arrived, I wasn’t at all sure what to say. It was eight o’clock in the morning, and the person who’d come to visit them the evening before had brought a free-range chicken dinner. To my surprise, when I asked the students how the last few days had been, their comments were not about the food or the shopping or their new hairstyles. Most of their comments were about how it felt to really be accepted in the community. One young woman remarked, "I got my bangs cut, but I liked the people at the salon the best. They gave me compliments." These children had lively interests and opinions; and were eager to discuss music, sports, and books. They were genuinely intelligent and amusing people.

In the midst of their eager questions, I started to wonder a few things about the way we do community, particularly in the church. For many people, and I count myself among them, who we allow into our community blueprint has a great deal to do with physical appearance. People with disabilities are often expected to appear more polished than their able-bodied counterparts. The "Looking Good" program, while vastly well-intentioned, unfortunately led to some preconceived notions among the students about what is expected of them in the world. Many of them come from communities where elaborate, professionally-done hair is not an option, to say nothing of expensive clothing; yet sighted adults insist on telling them that, in order to be accepted, they must look perfect.

I know very little about what the church is doing to reach the disabled community, but I definitely saw in this group of bright, enthusiastic children the shining eyes of the Holy Spirit, thirsting for acceptance. It is the church’s responsibility to teach these children that God has never expected perfection. I believe churches could potentially provide a safe haven for disabled people who are caught in the struggle between able-bodied expectations and their own perceptions of beauty. Too long, we have allowed societal standards of "perfect" to determine who God calls to his purpose. Yet the Bible is full of stories of unexpected heroes, some of whom had disabilities. Moses, the great orator and lawgiver, claimed not to be able to speak to Pharaoh because of a stammer. I could not help but wonder what glories the Spirit would have worked if these children in Saturday’s workshop had been given space to explore the wisdom of their minds and hearts; the parts of their lives that will matter long after coiffed hair has turned gray. Our goal as a church should not be to help people conform to our finite and fallen standards, but to recognize God’s inner light in each other as the only true source of beauty.
My first conclusion from the NEXTchurch conference in Charlotte last week was “well, at least no one else knows the answer any more than we do here.” My best guess is that whoever figures out how to preach the gospel in a way that brings different races and classes together will be on the right track. Here at Austin, we’ve made great progress toward creating a diverse and inclusive community in terms of gender, class, denomination and sexual orientation. But one issue that we haven’t really figured out how to talk about is race, or more specifically, racism. We are a predominantly white seminary in an overwhelmingly white Presbyterian denomination. Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour of the week. What’s next for the church involves finding a way to change that.

The reason I’ve spent so much time talking about the death penalty here at Austin is that I think it is one of the simplest examples of racial injustice we have, and one of the easiest to solve. We don’t have to restructure our economy, or decide whether a mother or a fetus is more important, or decide whom wealth belongs to. We simply have to see that Texas prosecutors are three times more likely to seek the death penalty against a black person than against a white person. We simply have to see that white majorities in Texas vote for laws, judges, district attorneys and governors to impose the death penalty primarily on black men. A group of mostly white people is killing a group of mostly black people, some of whom are innocent. If there is even a mustard seed of doubt in the “due process” that can sentence innocent Texans to death, then we can end capital punishment tomorrow.

Because racial bias in the death penalty is such a simple example of such a difficult problem, a church that can’t talk about the death penalty is harder to take seriously. If Methodist and Presbyterian congregations could find a way to say “racism is bad” in a specific context like capital punishment, we would be a lot better at preaching good news to people who aren’t white. If we want to make our churches more diverse, we can start by showing that we notice when the law treats white people and wealthy people with more grace than it does with African American and Latino people.

Our past speaks for us contrary to these hopes. The Presbyterian and Methodist churches said too little, too late about slavery. 100 years later we said too little, too late in the civil rights movement. Before we can successfully cultivate a diverse and inclusive community, we need to show that our past is not our future. As we choose between transformation and staying the same, perhaps we would be preaching better news if we supported people with everything to gain, instead of supporting the interests of those who fear they have something to lose.

Whether we know it or not, we talk about the death penalty every time we take communion together. The Eucharist was Jesus’s last meal before he was executed by the state. Jesus’s execution wasn’t the end of the church, but the beginning. Just so, the abolition of the death penalty is not an end, but a beginning. It’s a baby step closer to a show of good faith that can bring Jew, Greek, slave and free together to the table.
Around September 2010, on my first visit to Harvest Community Church I left a question on the visitor’s card. “What is your view on homosexuality?” I told them that I am a lesbian and have been in a relationship with my spouse, Lauren, for many years. The pastor, Scott invited Lauren and me to come and talk with him. That visit was the first of many Bible studies, prayer nights, dinners, and church services that we would participate in.

Lauren and I had left the Seventh-day Adventist church years earlier after we came to the conclusion that our relationship was blessed by God, though it was condemned by the church. We had brief stays at many different churches. Each followed by being asked to leave, finding printed materials that preached on the sins of homosexuality, or simply drifting away from a lack of connection and spiritual growth. When we found Harvest we felt that finally we had found the church community we had been longing for.

Tommy and Amber led the small group we joined. We’d meet at their house once a week with others from the church to fellowship, pray, and study scripture together. During this time the issue of homosexuality was rarely raised. We simply got to know one another as people, formed bonds and developed relationships. We had agreed with Scott in our first visit with him that we would be in conversation about our beliefs and in the meantime could be active in the church.

The time came, after attending Harvest for about 6 months, to have the in-depth discussion on homosexuality we had been anticipating. Lauren and I met with Tommy, Amber, Scott, and his wife, Melissa. Spread over a couple evenings we shared our beliefs with one another. Scott broke down the scriptures that pointed out to them that homosexuality, and therefore Lauren’s and my relationship, is wrong. Lauren and I had gone through the Biblical texts in regards to this issue numerous times but, especially given that Scott was a pastor, our arguments always seemed to fall short.

After these visits Lauren became distressed, believing that we were going to be kicked out as we had been before. I assured her that I did not think that would happen. We were in conversation. Despite differences we could continue to fellowship and be in dialogue. But, at what would be our last meeting, Lauren’s intuitions proved true.

I went alone that night because Lauren was not feeling well. Afterwards, I did not feel well either. In short, through tears, they said that we could not be in community with them if, while calling ourselves Christians, we rejected the Biblical truth they set before us and continued to live in sin. My words once again fell short as they stuck in my throat in disbelief and resignation to what was happening.
My immediate response was subdued as I tried to comfort Lauren in her anger and grief. I wanted to go back and show them they were wrong; that we could be in fellowship, that we are a part of the church whether they accept it or not. Later my tears would fall, anger would burn inside, deep aching for my friends would be felt, and the scarred membrane between my heart and the church would grow thicker.

The whole truth is that when Harvest told us we could not be in fellowship with them any longer, it was not just Scott, Melissa, Tommy and Amber who were hurting us. The church hurt us. Again, the church has hurt us. The grand result is that I am now not a part of a church. It had been a struggle to find our way back to church when we began attending Harvest. When we were hit with the new injury received there it only served to compound upon the previous injuries.

Since our time at Harvest, we have visited several churches, but never more than two or three times before we stop going. I know that I need to go to church and I want to go to church, but there seems to always be something deterring me from doing so. It is too far away. Service is too early. The stance on homosexuality is unclear. The sermon was nice enough, but boring and unmoving. A thousand reasons not to return press upon me and I readily accept them, while simultaneously feeling frustrated at myself for not going back; failing to act to repair this hole in my life.

I struggle to explain to people my relationship to the church. I am in seminary. I do feel called to chaplaincy or some sort of ministry. I attend chapel services at school, but I do not attend church. Explaining this to myself, let alone others, proves difficult. It becomes harder still when friends hear how we were treated at Harvest and invite us to visit their church with assurances that we will be accepted and loved. I appreciate their support and think I would like to visit their church, but I do not.

My actions confuse me because “I do not do the good I want” (Romans 7:19 NRSV). I long to be a part of a church community, but I maintain my distance from it. It is an internal push and pull; pushing away from the ones who have hurt me and still being pulled back toward the very body that encompasses these.

I am still mourning what we lost at Harvest. I am still mourning the loss of identity with the church I felt growing up, my sense of belonging, friendships, family and the hope I held for the church. And I am realizing how much anger, hurt and resentment I am still holding onto. The words from a Relient K song that has found its way into my life so many times comes to mind as an honest statement for how I feel about the church right now. “No, I don’t hate you. Don’t want to fight you. Know I’ll always love you. But right now I just don’t like you.”
The Word of the Day is: **THIRST**

**noun**

- A feeling of needing or wanting to drink something: *they quenched their thirst with spring water*
- literary: a strong desire for something

I am a self-identified music snob. It took me years of hanging out with (and complaining about) my music snob friends before I realized that I, indeed, was one of them. Compared to a few years ago, though, I have really mellowed out. Maybe it’s the busyness of grad school life or the fact that I’m not entrenched in the music scene anymore. But I think the primary reason is that mainstream music has just gotten better. There’s less need to seek out meaningful and artistic music when I can simply turn on the radio to hear prophets with banjos and synthesizers preaching through my speakers.

Musical trends, much like fashion, happen in cycles. How many neon pants and high top sneakers have you seen running around the UT campus? In fashion, the 80s are back (for better or for worse.) But if you ask me, in music, the 60s and 70s are back. This is a good thing. In that era, the prosperity of the 50s was crushed under the weight of Medgar Evers’ lifeless body and silenced by the sounds of terrified boys marching in a war that they didn’t understand, then defeated by a government that abandoned our trust. Artists like Buffalo Springfield, Bob Marley, and John Lennon stepped up to the microphone and cried, “Stop! Hey! What’s that sound? How long shall they kill our prophets? No woman, no cry. Imagine all the people sharing all the world.”*

Music has the power to make things happen. It has the capacity to challenge, inspire, and educate. It can speak the words written on our hearts when we do not have the strength or ability to do it ourselves. Music can **preach**. We live in a world where people listen to music more often than they read books. The iPod caused a seismic shift in our culture. It’s more likely to see a white headphone cord hanging out of someone’s backpack than a copy of *Fahrenheit 451*.

We keep talking about the “spiritual but not religious,” and the “secularization of society,” we bemoan them as causing the death of the Church. That seems to be where our conversation stops—death. But we don’t stop there, do we? Christian hope is rooted in the promise of new life. We proclaim the death of our savior until he comes again. We do it again and again. “Alleluia! He is risen!” We never get tired of saying it. Think about this: *What if these growing trends in music are trying to tell us that people are calling out for new life, that they are thirsting for the waters of Baptism?*

* Author’s own compilation of lyrics taken from Buffalo Springfield’s *For What It’s Worth*, Bob Marley’s *Redemption Song* and *No Woman, No Cry*, and John Lennon’s *Imagine*. 

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WORDS FOR FRIENDS:
A Column By Molly McGinnis

*Molly is a middler, M.Div student from the Presbytery of Arkansas in the PCUSA*

Sunset on Lake Hamilton in Hot Springs, AK

A banner from SXSW over Spring Break
Have you said any of these things?:

“What do you need?” “Call if you need anything.” “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Then the funeral is over, the dishes are returned, the thank you notes are written, and we go back to our normal lives…yet for that teenager who now has only one parent, life is no longer normal. We pledged to support the parents when they stood up to have their child baptized…so where are we when that teenager needs us during the time following their parent’s death, and I’m talking about the long term, not just the days/weeks following. The women’s organization is having their annual Mother-Daughter Tea—are you going to call that young lady, and invite her to attend with you? It is the annual camping-fishing trip for the men and boys, have you called that teenager and asked him to join you?

The teenage years are hard enough, but when they include the death of a parent, especially the same sex parent, they can be unbearable. Don’t assume that the surviving parent has it all under control; they are grieving too. We don’t think of this group as being overlooked but they are. I am especially mindful of this group right now because of the sudden death of my friend and ministry colleague, Aimee Wallis Buchanan, and her two teenagers. Aimee’s children are the same age as my sister and I when our Momma died suddenly. I was blessed to have people who invested themselves in my life, my younger sister, not so much, and years have passed since Momma’s death. One of us is on the path to serving the Kingdom, the other hasn’t darkened the door of a church in years. A voice of one who could have been overlooked.

JoAnne Sharp began her M.Div at APTS in the Fall of 2012. She is currently on a leave of absence.
When I was a little girl, maybe 9 or 10 or so, we had a man in our congregation named Adam. Adam was a special needs man, mentally handicapped in some way. He worked as a cashier at Tom Thumb, he lived with a caretaker, and he came to church every Sunday. He was one of the nicest people you could ever imagine. Adam would stand in the narthex between Sunday school and church and greet people as they walked by. On my way to meet my parents before we went into the sanctuary, I would run into him each week. Through simple, small-talk conversations, Adam and I became friends. We never knew very much about each other’s lives, but we considered each other a friendly face in the crowd. When I had a huge operation in fifth grade, he told me that he gave a prayer for me in church that Sunday. Adam had one of the most loving hearts in the world. Why, then, was I always the slightest bit wary of him, somehow made uncomfortable because he seemed different?

The sad reality is that even in church, the place where everyone should feel welcome and united in the body of Christ, there is still a huge social stigma tied to mental illness and disability. Even as young as I was when I knew Adam, I picked it up from the congregation around me. Adam moved away a few years after I met him, and I still wonder where he is from time to time. I hope he never picked up on my discomfort, and I hope even more that everyone with a mental illness or disability has a church that they feel comfortable in.

Society tends to think of mental illness as something that only happens to other people. We don’t like to think about depression or anxiety disorders, and certainly not about the possibility that a family member or close friend could develop schizophrenia. The facts show, though, that mental illness is everywhere, and it tends to run in families. Many of my family members, including myself, have taken anti-depressant medication at one point or another in our lives. Shouldn’t church be the place where we don’t have to keep things like that a secret? Mental illness is no more a weakness or a lack of faith in God than the flu, and it should never be something to be ashamed of.

As leaders in the church today, part of our job is to make sure that all of God’s children are welcome in the congregations we serve. Just as we would never make someone feel ashamed of having cancer or diabetes, we should never make someone with depression or schizophrenia feel ashamed. Even when mental disability makes us feel uncomfortable just as we are sometimes with someone who has a serious physical illness, we are called to treat that person as part of Christ’s body just like we are.

I find great hope in the examples of congregations who treat members with a mental illness or disease no differently than any other member. A small Presbyterian church in my college town had a member who was very much like Adam. He sang loudly with the congregation and read the scripture lesson from time to time. He was a beloved member of that church just as every member was beloved. This is how God wants us to treat God’s children. When we love one another in all our differences, including mental disability and mental illness, the world looks a little bit more like God wants it to look.
Word From the Earth: Environmental Refugees

In the 20th century ecumenical ministries such as Church World Service have worked to assist refugees that are displaced due to oppression or war-torn homelands. As the work of CWS evolved it led them to a deeper analysis of the root causes of such realities as hunger and poverty. The result was the 1978 Presidential Commission on World Hunger, which noted that the primary cause of hunger was poverty, i.e. human-made. Thus what was missing to end hunger was the political will to do so.

Barely into the 21st century there is a 2009 article from The Economist which informs us that we need a new definition for the term “refugees.” No longer does the term refer primarily to those tossed between states by war or tyranny. Instead it is environmental degradation which is the root cause of migration with more people forced to leave their homes from climate impacted events than war. There are currently 25 million classified as environmental refugees with a prediction that this number will increase six-fold over the next 50 years.

The church must prepare for this increase in refugees and I trust that we will as best we can.

Extreme weather events from climate disruption, a term which some say is a more understandable term than global warming, will continue. Drought, floods, and storms will take their toll on those least able to cope. As sea levels rise we will care for those who are exiled; a new type of diaspora. But at the same time we must confront the human-made cause of this hemorrhaging and inspire the political and moral will to treat it. These are not “natural disasters” and they are not acts of God. They are the consequences of our actions and inactions. Our charge is nothing less than to save the world by loving all creatures here below as God so loves. In plain English it will require reducing our carbon footprint from 22 tons per person per year to 1-2 tons or even less. This will involve repentance (turning away from) frivolous consumption and corporate greed but, with a renewed political, spiritual, and moral will, we can do it. God did not create a world that was unsustainable.

The church is called for such a time as this – to confront the most important moral issue that humankind will ever face: how must we exist in order to remain in existence?

And how must we prepare to increase our capacity to welcome the displaced stranger? When Church World Service got started following WWII its actions were parallel to new international laws such as the Treaty of Geneva. Victims of political conflict became entitled to food and shelter through government and aid groups. Environmental refugees are not yet recognized by international law thus the poorest and most vulnerable of our world receive the hardest blows from human-made climate induced events and then are further marginalized. The reminder from our Lord - “Just as you did it to one of the least of these…” (Mt. 25:40) - goes both ways.

There is no snooze button on this alarm. Rather there is an opportunity to lead by shouting from the mountaintops that climate stability is a choice that will require ingredients that the church knows how to talk about - kindness and love of neighbor, tending and keeping the garden, the golden rule, a discipline of simplicity, and sharing. We will not be engaging in a method of survival as much as an act of worship. How about it, people of faith? For such a time as this….

Sarah Macias is a MDiv middler in the Baptist tradition, and serves on Corpus Christi, Interfaith Environmental Network, and is Environmental Intern for Texas Impact.
Contributing to Kairos:

1. Kairos is the voice of the community at Austin Seminary.

2. Kairos generally carries no advertisements for sale of goods or services by individuals. An exception is the sale of a student or professor’s library or other study aids.

3. It is not possible to make all program announcements which are submitted by individual churches. Kairos is more likely to run announcements which apply to ecumenical or interfaith groups or groups of churches.

4. No letters which attack individuals or groups will be run in Kairos. This is to be distinguished from letters which might criticize the actions of individuals or groups.

5. Please note that ALL contributions are expected to be 300-500 words unless otherwise noted. Longer submissions may be excluded in final editing due to limitations of space.

6. Please also note that Kairos seeks to uphold the APTS policy on inclusive language. All contributors are strongly encouraged to use expansive and inclusive language and may be asked to edit their pieces to reflect this policy.

7. Kairos will publish letters to the editor that contribute to Christian conversation on the APTS campus. All letters must be signed.

8. Email submissions to the editor, Layton Williams, at layton.williams@student.austinseminary.edu. Editorial decisions are based on urgency, availability of space and editorial guidelines. Deadline is Wednesday at 5:00 pm. Submissions made after the deadline must be accompanied by a bribe.