

September 21, 2010

Dear Moderators, Clerks and members of Session,

At its stated meeting on September 2nd, the presbytery was reminded of the religious convictions of our namesakes Elijah Lovejoy and Salmon Giddings. Rev. Giddings established the first Presbyterian churches in this region, planting 12 churches in the face of intolerance and hostility to Protestantism and to our Presbyterian forbearers who settled here. Rev. Lovejoy preached and wrote against slavery. His convictions, rooted in faith, cost him his life. Of those who sought to silence him, Lovejoy asked, How many of my freedoms are you willing to remove before it begins to affect your own?

Based on the lessons of these men's lives, the Social Witness Policy Action Team and the Dismantling Racism and Privilege Ministry Team asked the presbytery to support the right of American Muslims to construct an Islamic community center in lower Manhattan, near the World Trade Center site. After some discussion, a majority of the commissioners voted to approve the recommendation, which is attached.

In taking this action the presbytery recognizes that good and faithful people disagree about this emotional issue. That was clear in the discussion on the floor of the stated meeting. It was also evident that most agreed that as persons of faith we are compelled to understand and engage in these timely and relevant discussions concerning religious freedom, even when we disagree about the limits of that freedom.

I am reminded that when the presbytery speaks to social issues like religious freedom it speaks "to the church" and not "for the church." That is, it speaks to Presbyterians and not for each individual Presbyterian. Through its efforts at discernment of the mind of Christ and the will of God the presbytery does not pretend to tell Presbyterians what to think but instead hopes to inform and to encourage Presbyterians to apply for themselves the values of our faith to the events of our times. In that context, the presbytery's endorsement of religious freedom related to the Islamic community center in New York comes with a challenge to all Presbyterians to engage the issues presented here responsibly, thoughtfully, and prayerfully.

Toward that end, the presbytery encourages congregations to study these issues and to enter into dialogue with the local Muslim community. The 219th General Assembly (2010) adopted a study paper and discussion guide, *Toward an Understanding of Christian-Muslim Relations*, that I recommend to you as a resource. The Thoughtful Christian (thoughtfulchristian.com), an on-line resource center sponsored by Westminster John Knox Press, also has an adult study called *The Mosque at Ground Zero* by Martin Marty that you might find useful. Links to these resources are on the presbytery website.

Mission Council will seek to facilitate the dialogue as well. At its October meeting, with the planning assistance of the Social Witness Policy Action Team, the Council will determine how and when to offer a gathering in cooperation with Interfaith Partnership to bring Presbyterians and Muslims together for conversation. Information about that event will be communicated through the weekly e-mail newsletter and on the website (glpby.org) when it is available.

Many blessings to you and those you serve.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Terry Epling". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'T' and 'E'.

Terry Epling, Stated Clerk