

FROM THE MINISTER

The scope of Sidney Freeman's ministry among us--as minister and then as minister emeritus--extended from being called here as a young man in 1957 until his death earlier this month. His memorial service gave us the opportunity to remember the city to which Sid was called. He once described it as "segregated from cradle to grave," a claim that was literally true. Charlotteans had separate hospitals and separate cemeteries, and, in between separate schools, theaters, drinking fountains, rest rooms, churches and neighborhoods. And, of course, separate did *not* mean equal.

At Sidney's memorial service Charles Jones, a civil rights hero, reminded us of the important role Sid and members of our congregation played in changing Charlotte. Charles was leading the sit-ins and boycotts, inspiring mostly young Johnson C. Smith students to act peacefully to break down the barriers that divided this community. Sid invited Charles Jones to come speak to the congregation. Some members were inspired and joined Sidney in walking picket lines, in standing up and sitting down for justice and equality. Charles Jones recognized three of our congregational heroes--Judy Reynolds, Charlotte Watkins, and Ann Wood--in the service, acclaiming them for their acts of courage and commitment.

Thanks to Charles, Sidney, Ann, Charlotte, Judy and many, many others, our city was forever changed. Compelled by the core values of our liberal religion, and unwilling to keep these values private, these members of ours embodied what it means to profess "inherent worth and dignity." They evidenced both integrity and compassion in choosing to act for the greater good. We owe them a deep debt of gratitude.

Those of us for whom the civil rights story is one we learned about rather than lived through may find ourselves wondering: what would I have done? Would I have had the courage to act? Would I have spoken up in the larger community? Would it have mattered enough to show up and stand up in the name of a deep commitment to "worth and dignity?"

If you have been paying attention to what is going on in our state, you know those questions need not be simply hypothetical. We need not transport ourselves in our imaginations back to some prior time in history to speculate about how we might act when our core values are at stake. Last year, the North Carolina legislature approved asking the citizens of our state to add a proposed amendment to our constitution. If a majority of us vote to so alter our state's

guiding document, this new portion will read: "Marriage between one man and one woman is the only domestic legal union that shall be valid or recognized in this State."

What does this mean? It means that if you are not legally married to a person of the opposite sex, then there is absolutely no way for you to be in any kind of "valid or recognized" relationship. There are no other options. You may feel with all of your heart that your relationship has worth but the state will declare it "invalid," "unrecognized." In other words, this addition to our constitution would mean that large groups of individuals and families would experience discrimination simply because of who they are.

I had great admiration and affection for Sidney Freeman. He was wonderfully supportive and encouraging to me. His mantle has now been passed on to us. Inspired, as was he, by the core values of our liberal religion, let us continue the work he was about, striving for justice and equality "until the dawn breaks and the shadows flee away."

—Jay Leach, Minister

This amendment threatens child custody and visitation laws. It creates a conflict with North Carolina's domestic violence laws. It strips public employers of the ability to provide domestic partner benefits like health insurance and potentially denies private businesses control over what benefits they offer their employees. But, let's not kid ourselves: at its core, this

amendment is a specific, calculated effort to blatantly discriminate against lesbian and gay North Carolinians. Not because of anything they have done but simply because of who they are. (If you want to learn more about the amendment and its discriminatory implications, check out www.protectncfamilies.org.)

This isn't the Charlotte or the North Carolina to which Sidney Freeman came as a young minister in 1957. In part, that is directly due to his efforts and to the efforts of some members of the Unitarian Church of Charlotte. Sadly, the fight for justice and equality in the face of blatant discrimination has not been won. So, we don't have to speculate about what we *might* have done. Instead, we can ask ourselves: what am I willing to do *now*?

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Peace, Jay