TRUTH IN PROGRESS – A multimedia education project
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Truth in Progress: New project links gay rights and black civil rights in dialogue

Can the equal rights movement for lesbians and gays be compared to the black civil rights movements? Montana writer and lesbian/gay rights activist Marilyn Bennett and black activist, minister, and writer Rev. Gil Caldwell, now of New Jersey, have launched a nationwide multimedia education project aimed at bringing those two movements closer together.

The pair will present their project, called **Truth in Progress**, at a public reception **Thursday, February 4, at the First Unitarian Church Dallas, 4015 Normandy, from 5:00-7:00 pm**. Truth in Progress recently received a $15,000 grant through the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation through the Montana Human Rights Network.

Bennett and Caldwell created Truth in Progress to engage people of different races and sexual orientations in a deeper dialogue about issues of race, sexual orientation, and religion. Working with Montana filmmaker Tonya Easeby, they will produce a series of interviews with activists and community leaders in places significant to the black civil rights and the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) rights movements. The project will include print, video, and an interactive website with filmed interviews of activists talking about their struggles for human rights. A feature-length documentary will be released in 2013.

The project will focus on stories from the two movements that are often compared, but that remain at odds with each other.

"Civil rights for African Americans and equal rights for lesbians and gays are not the same struggles," Bennett said. "These are different histories. These are very different experiences. But the fight for civil rights, and acknowledging equal rights, is always the same story. Maybe there can be a conversation between them. Maybe our project will help diffuse some of the tension and bring people together."

Dallas plays an important part in both activists' backgrounds. Bennett moved to Dallas in 1986 to attend SMU Perkins School of Theology and, after graduation, worked as the executive director of Perkins relations. During that time she worked with several programs to promote equal rights for gays and lesbians. Caldwell moved here in 1946 as a freshman in high school.

"I remember Dallas from the back seats of buses, the balconies of movie theaters where black folk sat, and the restaurants where we could not eat," he said. "There were stores where my mother could not shop, and others where she could not try on dresses before making a purchase."

Now Dallas is racially integrated, yet there are churches, schools, and even schools of Theology, where gays and lesbians are not welcome, he said. And that's why the two are coming to Dallas.

"We are going to bear witness that 'None of us is free until all of us are free,'" he said.

Bennett and Caldwell relish the quirky differences between them. They met at the 2000 General Conference of the United Methodist Church, in Cleveland, where both worked together to promote equality for lesbians and gays within the Methodist church. There—among other things—they participated in nonviolent civil disobedience and church officials had them arrested.

"But Gil had been arrested before," Bennett says. "He participated in the 1963 March on Washington and in the Selma and Montgomery marches of 1965. He knew what denial and exclusion were about, and what it takes to get past them. And we both knew that the two movements had much to teach and share with each other."

Then the two discovered they had the same birthday—38 years apart. A lifelong friendship began, based on their differentness (white/black; lesbian/straight; younger/older; female/male; without cane/with cane) and their shared passion for justice. In 2003 they began an extensive email correspondence. Through this frank and unusual exchange, they began to peel back layers of taboos and miscommunications between communities. The two came to see that defining and voicing their perspectives led to a larger truth, a "truth in progress." This dialogue was published in 2007 in a limited edition entitled, *Selections from Truth in Progress: Letters in Mixed Company*.

Bennett is a writer, community organizer, and currently the development director at the Myrna Loy Center, a performing and media arts center in Helena, Montana. She is also the official writer-in-residence at the Rodney Street Laundry. She is author of *What Happened in San Antonio* and co-author of *We Were Baptized Too: Claiming God's Grace for Lesbians and Gays*.

Caldwell is a retired African American United Methodist clergyman, having served churches in a variety of settings including Boston, Harlem, Washington, D.C, and Denver. He is the author of *Something Within*, *Race, Racism and Reconciliation,* and *Just the Right Word*. He is a regular contributor to the Reconciling Ministries Network blog. Gil was recently elected to the national board of PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays).

The Thursday reception is free and open to the public; donations will be accepted to support the project.