

# Reasonable Service: What the PCA's Latest Controversy Says about Its Understanding of Outreach, Evangelism, and Ethics

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March 16,  
2020



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Earlier this month, members of the Presbyterian Church in America learned that one of their congregations had allowed a theatre production titled “Transluminare: A Celebration of Transgender, Agender, Non-Binary, Genderqueer and Genderfluid Artists” to be held at one of its onsite ministry venues. The congregation in question, Memorial Presbyterian Church, is the same church that hosted the original Revoice conference in 2018, which itself set off a major controversy in the PCA. As such, this latest revelation seems to be another chapter in that ongoing saga, turning the concerns of many into an outright state of alarm.

For its part, Memorial Pres. issued a statement explaining its relationship to the venue which hosted the LGBTQ+ theatre event. They explained that “The Chapel” is a “secular arts venue” which “was decommissioned and sealed off from the church in 2007.” As such, they argue, it does not reflect a direct action or program of the church. They clearly state that “Memorial Presbyterian Church does not endorse art at The Chapel.” This explanation is a helpful starting point, but it hardly answers all of the relevant questions. The Church still owns the building and provides the basic utilities. It appears to provide staff for The Chapel as well as refreshments. Memorial Pres. calls The Chapel a “ministry partner” on their church website. Indeed, Missouri Presbytery saw this event as something which warrants church oversight. It felt it important to issue a public statement of their own, expressing that they had “grave concerns about the wisdom of hosting this event.” The presbytery has formed an investigatory committee to learn more.

Jake Meador recently wrote [a helpful essay](#) explaining this latest controversy and its significance for the PCA. I would like to add a bit more to what he has expressed. In particular I would like consider the matter in light of the PCA's own moral teaching, expressed in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, and then take up the question of "good faith"—not in the more familiar sense of "good faith subscription" to the Westminster Standards, but in terms of open and honest dealings when it comes to a church's own mission and ministry. If nothing else, this occasion should be a good opportunity for PCA officers to better organize their thoughts and clarify the way they explain how they carry out the mission of the church.

## What Is Transluminare?

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Transluminare, the occasion for this controversy, is an arts festival consisting of short plays, and it describes itself as being "A Celebration of Transgender, Agender, Non-Binary, Genderqueer and Genderfluid Artists." Its general overview can be found [here](#), and a sympathetic review of the 2020 production is available [here](#). The plays promoted transgenderism and even trans-speciesism, the concept that a person's soul is in the wrong body, not just when it comes to sex and gender but even when it comes to being human at all. The organization behind Transluminare is called "Q Collective." [In one brochure](#), they explain that they "see that gender, sexuality, and romantic orientation are not binary." The purpose of their event is to promote this point of view, "inviting you across, to transverse the gender spectrum." They hope to "change people's minds" about this topic.

The Chapel maintains that it does not endorse the art that it allows to be shown at its venue, and Memorial Pres. is clear that they do not believe that people should transition from one gender to the other. No one should conflate the Q Collective with Memorial Pres. And yet, it is entirely reasonable to point out that The Chapel is indeed "supporting" the Q Collective by providing the venue and staff for the event. Likewise, Memorial Pres. is supporting the Q Collective when it pays the relevant bills associated with the Chapel and insofar as The Chapel is indeed a ministry of the Church. Indeed, it does not seem to be a stretch to say that Memorial Pres. in some way "sponsored" Transluminare.

## Missional Church *In Extremis*

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To understand how the Transluminare event could happen within the PCA, readers should see it as an extreme but perhaps predictable ramification of a certain philosophy of ministry, common in our day. Evangelical and particularly "missional" churches routinely advocate for various kinds of parachurch ministry in the world of arts and culture. Some call for an aggressive or confrontational approach, while others say that mere "faithful presence" is a more effective strategy. This term, "faithful presence," was originally coined by James D. Hunter in his book *To Change the World*, but has become a shorthand way, not unlike the term "common good," to express the concept of Christians interacting with the

secular public realm, not in overtly distinctive ways, but simply according to basic morals and friendly manners. This posture is frequently described as winsome or hospitable. It argues against direct criticism or evangelism, at least in any public way, in favor of building more long-term relationships. After these relationships of trust are sufficiently built, opportunities for evangelism may make themselves apparent. Some proponents of this philosophy even deny that specifically evangelistic activity, arguing that the relationship itself or the image and reputation such faithful presence creates will itself be a sufficient Christian testimony. Memorial Pres. certainly seems to promote this view of evangelism and outreach. In their press release, they say:

Our agenda is to love people in the arts. And so the church provides the building and many of the volunteers who help staff the venue free of charge in an effort to build trust and relationship with our secular neighbors in the arts community. The mission for us is to serve non-Christians in the arts, displaying the welcome of Jesus through our hospitality. It is an effort to build relationship with communities that often mistrust Christians.

Similar language can be found in The Chapel's original vision statement. [A 2008 "By Faith" article](#) explains, quoting the relevant section of that statement:

The Chapel is not a bait and switch—no getting people into The Chapel, then making a gospel presentation. ...Indeed, The Chapel's vision statement says "Just as Jesus influences us from below by serving us— being there for us, washing our feet, dying for us— so we will put ourselves beneath local artists and musicians, being there for them, serving them ...

"They will not be pressured to attend worship services or be proselytized, but will experience a taste of the community life of the church. Artists will find a community not of judgment, but of welcome and love. Christians will love and serve each other with genuine affection, and this love will overflow to our guests. Those 'outside' the church will see in this love the gospel's power to bring diverse people together."

Thus it seems clear that this is how Memorial Pres. has gotten to where they are. They have intentionally implemented a specific strategy when it comes to outreach and evangelism.

Whether or not readers find this philosophy of ministry compelling on theological or even sociological grounds, it certainly creates a number of organizational problems for any church. The most basic question is whether activities which involve neither evangelism nor discipleship (at least in any explicit way) are appropriate for the church, considered as an organization. Certainly individual Christians could work together to promote civic activities, even perhaps in a "distinctively Christian way." But for the church itself to do so is a different matter entirely. If the church is willing to expand its mission in this way, it seems unclear as to how and where it could put limitations or make discriminating judgments and to what extent it would open itself up to civil liability in doing so.

At this point, some may wonder how exactly “The Chapel” is connected to Memorial Presbyterian Church. Is The Chapel a direct ministry of Memorial Pres, or is it an independent organization for which Memorial simply provides a venue? In their response to the controversy, Memorial put some distance between themselves and The Chapel. There they say that the Chapel is a “secular arts venue attached to Memorial Presbyterian Church.” The building which houses The Chapel is physically “attached” to Memorial, but it has been “decommissioned and sealed off from the church.” The Chapel “became a secular arts venue” and “has a separate, subsidiary board, a separate public identity, a separate building and a separate street address.”

This would seem to indicate that the Chapel is an entirely independent organization from Memorial, even if there is an overlap in personnel. At the same time, the statement from Missouri Presbytery indicates that both Memorial Pres and MO Presbytery recognize some measure of jurisdiction when it comes to The Chapel. Furthermore, the 2008 “By Faith” article states that The Chapel’s vision statement was submitted to the session of Memorial Pres. for approval. In that vision statement, written primarily by Pastor Greg Johnson, we read that The Chapel is an extension of the church, not the church universal, but the particular expression of the church found at Memorial Pres: “*As a church for the city, our vision is..*”

[A recent post at Reformation21](#) mentions “a prospectus booklet for The Chapel, dating back to sometime before its formal launch as a ministry of Memorial Church.” That booklet is not (to my knowledge) available online, but it has been shared among members of the PCA. It has all the markings of a public document. It includes contact information and even advertises a way for people to contribute to the fundraising campaign. The booklet explains The Chapel as being one application of Memorial’s, “Evangelism Strategy,” quoting from that document, where the church states:

We are willing to employ deliberate and varied ways to send Christians into sub-communities of the central corridor such as university campuses, internationals, the gay community, the music and arts community the poor, the medical institutions, government offices, and business and financial networks.

The booklet goes on to explain that The Chapel is a form of “community-driven evangelism,” also known as a “catechumen model” which seeks to “get non-Christians into the ‘edges’ of the church community.” A few pages later it adds, “A missional church assumes non-Christians are always present, seeks that, and welcomes them into friendship. At Memorial, we have found that most of our new believers (“conversion growth”) were converted to the Christian community first, and to Christ only afterward.” Clearly, The Chapel was created to be an extension of Memorial Presbyterian Church. The Q&A section of the booklet reinforces this point:

Q. Is The Chapel a ministry of the church, or is it a separate institution?

A. It is a ministry of the church. In May 2007, the elders voted “to endorse the chapel ministry under the oversight of the Session and authorize the appropriate teams to prepare for a launch” (Session Motion 2007.05.A.05, passed unanimously).

It is certainly possible that Memorial has restructured since it launched The Chapel in 2007. The Chapel may now be “a separate institution.” However, the fact that Memorial did not explain this history in their press release, and the fact that their church website gives the impression that The Chapel continues to be one of its ministries, makes it reasonable to ask the question. Given Memorial’s philosophy of ministry, it would be unreasonable not to ask this question.

## Transluminare and Christian Ethics

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If The Chapel is indeed a ministry of Memorial Pres, then it is, by the logic of the PCA’s own ecclesiology, connected to the broader denomination through the regional presbytery and then the General Assembly. It should also be evaluated in light of the PCA’s doctrinal and moral standards, particularly the Westminster Confession of Faith and catechisms. There are a few sections of those standards which are relevant to this event.

Question 138 of the Larger Catechism explains that the seventh commandment requires us to preserve “chastity in body, mind, affections, words, and behavior” in ourselves as well as in others. One way that we are to do that is to “shun all occasions of uncleanness.” Question 139 adds that “impudent or light behavior” is forbidden by the seventh commandment, as well as “lascivious songs, books, pictures, dancings, [and] stage plays.” Certainly some of what was performed at Transluminare would fall under these descriptions. The fact that at least one of the plays at Transluminare featured a strict Christian family member said to be opposed to transgenderism, deemed “transphobic” by some of the event’s own literature, gives us reason to wonder if the third commandment was not also violated.

Westminster Confession of Faith 20.4 addresses the “publishing of such opinions, or maintaining of such practices, as are contrary to the light of nature, or to the known principles of Christianity (whether concerning faith, worship, or conversation), or to the power of godliness.” It says that such activity does not fall under the proper bounds of Christian liberty and that those “erroneous opinions and practices” and “the manner of publishing or maintaining them” are “destructive to the external peace and order which Christ hath established in the church.” As such, persons who maintain or publish such opinions and practices “may lawfully be called to account, and proceeded against, by the censures of the church.”

It seems clear that Transluminare published opinions which violate the seventh commandment and are even contrary to the light of nature. After all, Transluminare featured plays which advocated for women to take testosterone treatments in order to become more like men, for transgender marriage and parenting, and for a human “to transform into another species.” These are clear violations of Biblical morality, as interpreted by the Westminster standards. Indeed, they are shocking proposals which cannot but create a scandal in the PCA.

At this point, an objection may be posed. Transluminare was an activity of the Q Collective, not necessarily The Chapel. The Chapel maintains that it does not endorse the art it hosts. Thus The Chapel cannot be held accountable for the art and activities of the Q Collective. To respond to this, we should consider the principles of moral cooperation. While largely associated with Catholic Social Theory, there is nothing credally distinctive about these principles. Indeed, they rely on basic moral concepts, understood by common reason. As such, Protestants can make good use of them.

What are these principles? A helpful primer is available [here](#), but we can simplify them according to a distinction between formal and material cooperation in evil. Formal cooperation occurs when a person shares the intent of the evildoer. Material cooperation is cooperation in a complex chain of events which will result in evil but where the individual participant does not share the intent. Both forms of cooperation can further be distinguished by how close or “direct” the cooperation is. Formal cooperation in evil, no matter how near or far, is always immoral. Material cooperation may or may not be immoral, depending on the relevant circumstances.

We can explain by way of example. Formal cooperation in evil would occur when a person helps someone rob a bank. If this help is active cooperation in holding the bag or driving the car, then it is immediate or near formal cooperation. If this help is of a more removed variety, but with knowledge of the intent, such as the case of someone providing the guns, knowing full well what they will be used for, then it is distant or mediate formal cooperation. Both sorts of formal cooperation are always immoral.

By contrast, a person involves themselves in material cooperation if they do not share the intent of the action but have some causal role in it. If the bankrobbers bought their weapons from a legal dealer, the dealer would therefore be materially cooperating in the robbery. In this case, the gun dealer may or may not be acting immorally. If he knows the intent of the robbers—even if he does not personally share it—then this would qualify as a sort of close or immediate material cooperation. Because he knew their intent, his cooperation can be held responsible, in part, for what happened as a result of it, and thus it too is considered immoral. If the gun dealer does not know the intent, then he does not bear the same responsibility, though there may be compelling reasons for him to ask a number of questions in order to discern the intent. A similar analogy here would be a

bartender who suspects a patron has had “one too many.” He is justified in refusing to sell more drinks to such a person. Indeed, he has a moral responsibility to anticipate such a possibility and to prevent what would likely occur if he continued to serve the man drinks.

In the case of The Chapel, we are dealing with a non-essential activity that is staffed by volunteers. They have some advance knowledge of what the events they host will be. Indeed, in the 2007 ministry plan The Chapel’s leadership says, “Our intention is to address concerns over content in advance by simply not inviting artists known for blasphemous or abusive art. We will avoid inviting specific bands that are closely tied to the drug scene, for example.”

Thus they acknowledge that they do bear some responsibility in hosting events and state their goal of screening out certain performances based upon what can reasonably be predicted about them. It stands to reason then that The Chapel was not wholly ignorant about Transluminare. Whether or not they shared the intention of Transilluminare to change people’s minds about human sexuality, they knew that such an activity would be taking place in the venue that they were providing. At minimum, we have a case of close or immediate material cooperation with an immoral activity. We should add that this is the second year that Transluminare has been held at the Chapel, and so Memorial Pres. had sufficient time to learn about the event and its goals.

## Technicalities Erode Good Faith

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Some may be uncomfortable with this kind of moral casuistry. Are we not running the risk of behaving like lawyers? Can’t we just give one another the benefit of the doubt, the judgment of charity?

The problem with this objection is that it seeks to insulate true responsibility through what is only an appearance of love. Indeed, such an approach would only be *the accidents of love*. The substance of love involves actually wanting what is best, for our brothers to accurately identify what is happening so that they can carry out the proper duties of the ministry. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:10).

In fact, this latest controversy with Memorial highlights the ways in which “good faith” quickly creates bad faith. The broader church is assured things are on the up and up, but the explanations appear to be a case of Memorial wanting to have their cake and eat it too. The Chapel is simultaneously called a “sanctuary” and a “secular venue.” It is “sealed off” from the church, and yet it is “the edges of the church,” a primary way in which catechumens can potentially be brought into the church. The Chapel has a “separate public identity” from the church, and yet it is a way “for members of Memorial Presbyterian Church to invest in the current generation of artists in our city.”

The PCA has had similar cases of churches employing technicalities to avoid breaking the letter of the law. In 2009, it was discovered that some churches declined to officially ordain any of their deacons so that they could promote men and women equally in the diaconal capacity. This was thought to avoid breaking any of the PCA's laws while still allowing women to participate fully in the role of deacon. No women had been ordained, and yet churches were able to have women deacons. This was legitimately seen as a violation of the spirit of the law and was criticized by the 2017 PCA report on "Women Serving in the Ministry of the Church."

Unfortunately, no action was taken to prevent churches from continuing to use the language of deaconess or even apply the name "deacon" to men and women in an indiscriminate way, and so a measure of distrust remains. It is also not unheard of for some PCA congregations to employ female staffworkers who themselves advocate for women's ordination to the ministry. Many lay people simply assume that these women are ordained. In order to defend such cases, a person may well be required to engage in a bit of "legalism" of their own.

Given this landscape, the only way for "good faith" to work in the PCA is if it does so with full honesty and clarity of conversation. Churches must reject equivocal language. Presbyteries must not be content with knowing the bare minimum about their membership. Instead, we should apply the golden rule to one another, both in extending charitable judgment and sharing adequate and appropriate information. Concerned critics should absolutely be slow in making accusations against their brothers, but likewise, those in positions of authority must be proactive in upholding the peace and purity of the church.

We could perhaps simplify this argument to a basic biblical point. Deut. 22:8 states that homeowners have a responsibility to anticipate reasonable risk and take proactive measures in protecting their guests. This same principle applies to us today, as it is a basic moral law. Churches should anticipate moral and spiritual dangers, as well as physical ones. Paul applies something of this reasoning when he argues that Christians must anticipate ways in which their spiritual liberty might harm others. "Do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil" (Rom. 14:16). Even if Memorial Presbyterian Church's evangelism philosophy is good, the way that it has been executed at The Chapel has caused it to be spoken of as evil. Indeed, it has caused the broader church to be spoken of as evil. This is not a matter of overscrupulous outsiders judging from afar. This is a matter of Biblical ethics and connectional ecclesiology.

## Conclusion

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I have nothing but confidence when it comes to the PCA's doctrine. As I have written in the past, there is a great deal of agreement in the PCA about the moral issues having to do with human sexuality. I am even optimistic about the findings of this year's study report on issues

related to LGBT ministry. There is no true “liberalism” in the denomination. But there is quite a bit of what appears to be pastoral negligence and bureaucratic obfuscation. Frankly, Transluminare seems like the proverbial “Big E” on the pastoral eye chart. Can it really be that the leadership of our church doesn’t see it?

Many churchmen are also disturbed by agreement in words but then dramatic disagreement in actions. Are we really saying the same thing? Do we mean the same thing when we sign off on the same expressions? Even if the denomination gives the right answers, will our churches even stop to ask the questions?

This latest controversy is frustrating, perhaps even exasperating. But the reality is that it’s much bigger than just the one particular incident in St. Louis. For the PCA to truly grow and flourish, it should use this occasion to have a conversation about the church’s mission, the appropriate application of the law of God to specific moral cases, and the key to sincere unity in a diverse ecclesiastical body.

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