

Arizona ministers use sermon series to critique 'progressive' faith

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [July 8, 2015](#) issue

When eight pastors in Fountain Hills, Arizona, were planning a joint sermon series called "'Progressive' Christianity: Fact or Fiction?" they didn't invite a local pastor who had cowritten a curriculum on the topic.

"You'd think if they want to do a series on progressive Christianity, they'd want the guy who has written a DVD curriculum on it," said David Felten, who is coauthor of *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity*. "That indicates to me that it's not just a broad concern, but aimed at us"—him and his congregation, the Fountains, a United Methodist church.

The May and June sermon series in the town of 22,500 caught the attention of national media, as well as pastors in the region and Christian leaders nationally and internationally who have signed an open letter expressing concerns about the series. Congregations taking part include Baptist, Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, and nondenominational congregations.

Bill Good, pastor of the Fountain Hills Presbyterian Church and current president of the local ministerial association, said the sermon series compared progressive Christianity to biblical, traditional, and orthodox Christianity.

Good's sermon, "Why Does It Matter That the Bible Is Reliable?" includes video of Fred Plumer, president of ProgressiveChristianity.org and a Jesus Seminar participant, speaking about the process by which the Bible was put together over centuries. According to an audio recording on the church website, Plumer said of the Bible, "We certainly do not see this as the Word of God, even in the sense of being inspired so intently that it retains the sense of authority that it came from God."

Good disagrees. He calls the Bible "the inspired Word of God" and "our rule for faith and life," he preached.

The ministerial association didn't invite Felten to present his views "because that wasn't the medium we were working with," Good told the *Century*. It was a sermon series rather than a forum, and "we felt in some ways that we were entering into

dialogue” by using the videos as part of the sermons.

“I doubt that progressive Christianity is any more uniform in its theology . . . than those who would describe themselves as traditional or orthodox,” Good said. “Look at the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), for example.”

For Felten the sermon series points to theological diversity among Christians.

“I think progressive Christianity is the belief of many in the mainline, and it has been for 80 [or] 90 years,” he said.

Members of the Fountains have noted that they meet people in the grocery store and at their children’s schools who attend the churches holding the sermon series.

“That’s where I get sad, because I know this is affecting friendships and relationships in town,” Felten said. “I’m just wondering what the further repercussions will be.”

Felten’s relationships with the pastors of the ministerial association changed two years ago during planning for the ecumenical Easter sunrise service. Good and Felten had a conversation about a newspaper article in which Felten made comments about the resurrection of Jesus being metaphorical.

“What I recall saying to him was, David, if I believed what you do, I don’t know that I’d be eager to get up early on Sunday because I don’t know what we’d be celebrating,” Good said.

Felten heard that he wasn’t meeting the “measure of orthodoxy” of the association’s other ministers.

Then or now, the ministerial association has no creed or pledge that members are expected to agree to, Good said.

Crystal Steinberg, a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, previously served in Fountain Hills. When she arrived in 2010, she was invited to a ministerial association meeting, but when the other pastors saw her enter the room—she was the only woman present—they turned around in their chairs rather than standing up to introduce themselves. The ministerial association made it clear that “it wasn’t a place for gathering and dreaming together about what we could do,” she said.

Steinberg now lives in Wisconsin, but she saw what the pastors wrote about the sermon series, including the comment that “there is a great deal of confusion regarding the extreme differences between what some call ‘Progressive Christianity’ and true biblical Christianity.”

Steinberg got to know members of those pastors’ churches when some of them volunteered for an ecumenical ministry coordinated by the ELCA congregation—with support from the local Catholic church, which is also not part of the ministerial association—to provide meals for those in need.

“I didn’t experience the people of Fountain Hills to be confused in any way,” she said. “I found the people there to be reflective, interested in dialogue and conversation. I think it’s unfortunate that their openness could be labeled as confusion.”

Even if they were confused, she wondered, how would a sermon series address their confusion?

“When do the people get to ask questions in a sermon series?” she said. “If they were in the community center hosting a dialogue . . . I could see that being inspiring and engaging to people.”

No longer participating in the ministerial association, Felten and Steinberg strengthened connections with groups from other faiths, including through an interfaith Thanksgiving service that was already happening annually. (The ministerial association members’ churches host a separate, Christian Thanksgiving event.) The Fountains is a multifaith campus: a Reform Jewish congregation and a Buddhist group meet in the building. The congregation has also held forums with local Muslims, and church members were part of the peaceful response to the recent armed protest rally outside a Phoenix mosque.

After hearing about the sermon series, several pastors from the PCUSA Presbytery of the Grand Canyon, to which Good’s congregation belongs, organized an open letter.

“We celebrate and appreciate a healthy tension between conservative, progressive, and other understandings of God, Jesus, and the Bible,” the letter states. “We believe we are all better together than apart and seek to build bridges of understanding and mutual respect.”

Peggy Roberts, a pastor in Phoenix, said letter organizers initially sought signers within the presbytery, but the effort grew nationally and internationally, among Presbyterians and others. They responded publicly since the sermon series was public, she said.

“We’re saddened by the whole tone of the debate, and we wanted to clarify that he [Good] does not represent us or, we feel, the diversity of expressions found not only in the Christian faith but in the Presbyterian tradition,” she said. “We hope to be in conversation with the churches and the pastors in some way in hopes that we can get past this divisive point.”

Eric Ledermann, pastor of University Presbyterian Church in Tempe, Arizona, who drafted the letter, spoke with Good after the sermon series began. They reached no agreement, other than that they would pray for each other.

Good said he wished that Ledermann or some of the other pastors in the presbytery had called him after hearing news reports that characterized the sermon series as a “faith fight.” “I wish I had been asked, is this really what’s going on out there?” Good said.

The open letter had more than 200 signatures as of mid-June, with Ledermann hearing from moderate and conservative church leaders who disagreed with the way the sermon series was conducted. “We’ve hit a chord,” Ledermann said. —*Christian Century*