

Pat Conover

Pat Conover is a minister, sociologist, and retired policy advocate for the United Church of Christ's (UCC) Justice and Witness Ministries. Born in Washington, D.C. in 1940, Pat attended Chicago Theological Seminary at age 21, developing a social justice consciousness alongside a religious one. Pat identifies as a bigender or transgender person and came out as such to his and her congregation at Seekers' Church in 1997 with a sermon, "Coming Out Christian." Through Pat's ongoing ministry with Seekers' and her advocate work with the UCC, the United Church of Christ elected in 2003 to welcome and affirm transgender ministers in their congregations. To learn more about Pat Conover, visit his and her website: <http://www.patconover.com/>

Document A: Excerpt of "Coming Out Christian," a sermon by Pat Conover to the congregation at Seekers' Church in Washington, D.C., March 16, 1997.

...I have been on a long healing journey as a bigender person... I hope that opening up this story with you today will be both a healing step for me and an additional deepening of Seekers' understanding of inclusiveness. If we are most likely to grow at our points of vulnerability then this may become a rich moment indeed...

The words bigender and transgender are probably not well known words for all of you. Rather than go through a lot of formal distinctions I'm going to just tell a little bit about why claiming and naming myself with these words is important to me.

...The social roles, man and woman, and the cultural images, masculine and feminine, are human creations. Such social and cultural [concepts] are so basic we sometimes slide into thinking of them as "natural," as if this is just the way things are... Other cultures have made social and cultural space for people who did not fit neatly into the distinction of man or woman. Most of the Native American traditions had special places for "two-spirit" people, often as healers or as ritual leaders...

All social and cultural stereotypes, including the roles of "man" and "woman" should be evaluated in terms of Christian values... The way I work with the concepts of masculine and feminine is to affirm all that is virtuous, whether it is named masculine or feminine, and to work and live against all that is destructive or alienating, whether it be done in the name of "being a man" or "being a woman." I've gotten a lot of support for becoming a more nurturing parent, for being a more responsible housekeeper, for example.

The harder part for some of you has been that I also want [the] experience...that comes with claiming a distinctly feminine appearance. This may or may not be important to others, but explicitly working with my feminine appearance has opened up spiritual and psychological wellsprings that had felt locked away from me. I've tried to give some of the fruits of that work

back to Seekers in several ways. The core of my story is that my experience of working with my feminine appearance, as well as working in other ways with the virtues called feminine in this culture, has very much become part of claiming my spiritual wholeness, of knowing my soul.

This journey has not been an easy one for me. When I was a teenager I thought I was the only person like this in the world. My transgender community was so oppressed that I could find no signs of it... This society taught me shame and taught me to hide... One of the reasons that sermons like this have to be preached is so that every gay boy child, every exploring lesbian, every hungry bisexual young person, every seeking transgender child will know that they are not alone, that God loves them, and that there is a welcome waiting them in the covenant of faithful Christians, including today in Seekers community. When such support is real, when it is fully visible, then fewer people like me will have to work so hard to get rid of the societal sicknesses of homophobia and transphobia that they swallowed.

Psychiatrists and preachers tried to put people like me back in the bottle... Psychiatrists said they were just trying to help us adjust to a Judeo-Christian society. Preachers said we were sinful and turned us over to the clinicians to be cured. This awful oppression began to turn around for gays and lesbians in 1973 when the official voices of psychiatry and psychology said homosexuals were not sick. It has to happen for transgender people now.

So the next time you hear that someone is bigender, or transgender, or transvestite, or transsexual, I hope you will think, "Oh, such a person might be like Pat, a caring and committed Christian, working away at being a good parent and a good spouse, taking up her and his share of the work of the world." And when your children ask about me, I hope it will be easy for you to say, "Pat is someone who likes to dress like a man sometimes and like a woman sometimes because he and she wants to know and experience the best things that men and women know..." I don't think you have to worry about the children too much because they know better than most of us about the importance of play as a way to learning and growing. And if you come upon a child for whom my witness is troubling, I hope you will be able to appreciate that something that was hidden and hurting in that child finally has a positive reference, one small standing ground for further growth and exploration. And if any of you find that you have a child who is showing inclinations towards being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, I hope this sermon will help you more easily embrace your child and to affirm the path by which love and passion is becoming manifest in your child's life.

The task of inclusion in Seekers isn't done until there is public space for me to be known...

...

And now I need to tell you why I think the Jeremiah scripture is so important. Let me repeat verse thirty-three in chapter 31.

I will set my law within them and write it on their hearts.

To understand what an important spiritual breakthrough this is, it helps to compare Jeremiah's covenant with the covenants of Moses, Abraham and David.

The first historical covenant was with Moses... The founding event of leading the people out of Egypt came to its climax with the gathering at Sinai. As thanks for their liberation, the followers of Moses were to become keepers of the law, starting with the Ten Commandments. The class of priests, scribes and lawyers that made the rule of law...carried forward one of the founding events for the Judeo-Christian tradition...

The larger point here is that the Mosaic covenant created laws written in stone, laws which were objective, and an authority to enforce them...

But with Jeremiah, two more changes are added.

The first is that the law of God is immediately knowable. It is written on the heart and not on stone. The second change is that the covenant is directly with the people and not mediated as a hierarchical possession of a Moses...

Our task as spirit people, as Christians, is to figure out what the spiritual guidance of God is and what is just the limited [biases] of any particular culture...It is harder to see through the cultural blinders that [have] led the church to punish people like me so severely.

To read Pat's full sermon, visit: <http://www.patconover.com/christian/comingoutchristian.html>

Document B: “Affirming the Participation and Ministry of Transgender People Within the United Church of Christ and Supporting their Civil and Human Rights,” by Pat Conover, in *Transgender Tapestry: The Journal of the International Foundation of Gender Education*, Edition No. 114, Jan. 2008.

**AFFIRMING THE PARTICIPATION AND MINISTRY OF
TRANSGENDER PEOPLE WITHIN THE UNITED CHURCH OF
CHRIST AND SUPPORTING THEIR CIVIL AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

The United Church of Christ is a mainline denomination of 5800 congregations and 1.2 million members in the United States. While the denomination had already taken the lead among mainline protestants in affirming the ministry and participation of lesbian and gay members and clergy, and was advocating for the civil rights of gay and lesbian people, it was still a stretch to so clearly affirm transgender people in the life of the denomination and take up advocacy for their rights in society.

*The lead advocate for the resolution was Pat Conover who was serving the United Church of Christ as a policy advocate in the Washington Office of Justice and Witness Ministries. In the 1990s Pat served for several years as a representative of the IFGE Board of Directors for outreach to the religious community in the United States. Pat is the author of *Transgender Good News*, the first book to provide both a thorough scientific assessment of transgender experience and expression as well as an extended theological analysis that makes the case for full recognition and inclusion of transgender people in both church and society. The book is available through the IFGE Bookstore. Pat's writing on transgender matters is available at www.patconover.com/transgender.*

[Adopted by the Twenty-fourth General Synod on July 15, 2003.]

WHEREAS, God has brought forth human beings as creatures who are male, female, and sometimes dramatically or subtly a complex mix of male and female in their bodies; and

WHEREAS, human cultures have created a broad diversity of roles for men and women, and have sometimes created roles for people named as neither man nor woman often revered and respected roles; and

