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Statement of Faith for Albany Presbytery – February 4, 2017

Actions speak louder than words. What then is my *real* faith-statement? -Not a careful theological essay, but daily choices and behavior. Look at those. For over 38 years my personal goal has been to offer living proof of the gospel. Usually I picture this in terms of doing well, but in trying on my own I often fail. Thankfully, God works very well through weakness. In life and in ministry, God's glory matters most.

Here is the law of spiritual growth: "He must increase, and I must decrease." (John 3:30)

Certain occasions, though, do require words. Today I am drawing upon words which I have spoken before, which represent my faith...

First things first: "I bet my life on resurrection. If Jesus is dead, if this all is a myth, I should quit right now and join the majority on Sunday mornings."

On the Deity: "God is one: infinite, eternal, personal, holy, and mysterious. God is self-revealing, communal, and complex: three persons, overflowing with mutual love and regard. We catch glimpses of God's dynamic interaction through the ways we encounter God. For example, sometimes we relate to God as Creator, Provider, Sovereign or Protector. In cases like those, the classical language is Father. Jesus often prayed using this term. Other times, we relate to God as Savior, Deliverer, Redeemer – and we speak of God the Son (like he did). But when relating to God as Presence, Advocate, Guide or Inner Light, we often say "Holy Spirit." // Muslims accuse us of having three gods, one of whom is actually a man. If I may oversimplify, it's more like a Being who is above us, beside us, and inside us all at once. // Language and logic occasionally fall short of describing what experience knows. The early Christians didn't *start* with the Trinity; they came onto this concept when nothing else would do. // It simply is not possible to know God through our heads; it takes heart and commitment as well. // The God of the Bible is way too strange for humans to ever invent!"

On scripture: "People who experienced God through visions, voices, events, or other means shared their stories in such a way that eventually led to our Bible. God the Holy Spirit guided this process from memory to reflection, to writing and editing. Scripture's authority derives from its Author, which canonical councils recognized. Yet God has never seen fit to preserve a perfect original copy. So, relying as always on the Holy Spirit, we make the best use of what we have. Thus in-spired, words leap from the page. They open pathways to God, provide

background for understanding, and grant us instruction for practice and faith. Even more, they point us toward God's living Word, who *is* Jesus the Christ.

On sin and salvation: God made humans for a special relationship, marked by willing obedience. In trying to overreach and ignore the Creator, we have distanced ourselves and deserve condemnation. But God reaches out: through angels, Law, prophets, and ultimately Jesus. Jesus taught, healed, forgave sinners, identified with us, and paid the price we owe. // Some people claim, "All paths lead to God." Others say forgiveness is universal. I wonder whether the first group truly appreciates how lost and broken we are. Regarding the second group: If their view is correct, I for one will not complain. But it's hard for me to make sense of Jesus' ministry, especially his suffering, if he knew it made no difference. Jesus spoke and acted as if people's responses to him bore great consequence."

On the Church: "Ever since calling his first disciples, Jesus demanded belonging, not just believing. Love can be awfully abstract, you know, until it's time to practice – and where better than in community? // How can you say you love Jesus, but not his bride? Jesus gave his *all* for the Bride! // The Church is not a showcase for saints so much as a hospital for sinners. // If you ever manage to find a perfect church, keep looking; you won't qualify."

On the sacraments: "I can preach over and over about grace, forgiveness, commissioning, etc., but this water says it all. -Ordinary water, with an incredible promise. Jesus is once again acting in our midst. // You can travel across the world, you don't have to know the language, but when you come across Christians breaking bread and sharing this cup (whatever the cup may contain) – you know in your heart that you and they are one. I have more together in common with my African sisters and brothers than I do with some blood relatives."

On unity: "I never learned much from folks who agree with me. That's why I prefer good engagement. // Unity is hard, but Jesus prayed for unity. Every schism tears into his garment."

On discipleship: "Jesus wants *followers*, not just admirers. I find plenty of Christians who know the parable of the builders (one on rock, one on sand), but very few who remember the point."

On mission: "We were saved to serve. God the Holy Spirit has gifted us differently so that all of us can help. // Picture a sign hanging over the church exit: "Now you are entering the mission field." // What does mission look like? -Evangelism? Yes! -Feeding the hungry? Yes! -Peace and justice work? Yes! // Lord knows, there's need for all we can do. But we can't do *anything* (of value) without prayer."

On last things: "I believe the best is yet to be. I have read the last page of the Bible."