

**Anticipated Questions Regarding the
2017 Statement on Theological Unity and Diversity
at Bethany Presbyterian Church**

As a session, we expect and welcome questions and comments from the congregation regarding our proposed *2017 Statement on Theological Unity and Diversity at Bethany Presbyterian Church*. Here are several anticipated questions, together with our best attempts at answers. In this matter, as always, session strives to be guided by, and humbly looks to, Jesus' words to shape our questions, discussions and actions:

"I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other." (John 13:34-35).

April 17, 2017 draft

1. Does this new statement affirm same-sex relationships?

This statement neither affirms nor rejects monogamous same-sex relationships. What this statement makes explicit is that we are not in agreement on this issue, and also that it is not *the essential issue* of Christian discipleship. The essential issue is acknowledging Jesus as Lord and being united and centered on him. The statement treats affirmation of monogamous same-sex relationships as a disputable matter. By "disputable", we mean this is an area in which faithful Christians can disagree but can remain in communion.

In this way our approach to this issue is very similar to what the apostle Paul addressed in Romans 14:1 - 15:6 where Gentile believers and Jewish believers in Jesus could not agree on the most divisive issue in the church at the time: Sabbath laws and kosher dietary rules. Paul names the issues, but he does not resolve them. He basically says that both sides have good reasons. And then he says two things:

- First, *"Each one should be fully convinced in his or her own mind."* (Rom. 14:5) That is, as *The Message* puts it, "Each person is free to follow the convictions of conscience."
- And second, *"Each of us will be accountable to God. Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another."* (Rom. 14:12-13).

Today, Sabbath laws and food restrictions don't seem as vital to us as issues around sexuality. But back then, these issues were life and death matters. Remember that Jesus was always getting in trouble because of those with whom he *ate*. The first plot to

destroy him was hatched immediately after he had broken Sabbath rules (Mark 3:6). Paul is saying to this hotly debated issue in Rome that this is a disputable matter: you may follow your convictions, and do not judge others.

2. Will Bethany always live in this tension around LGBTQ Christians and the church or will we find some resolution?

We don't know if this tension will get resolved. However, we know that we are not going to resolve it with a policy. When it comes to selecting ordained church officers, Bethany as a part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PC(USA)) has always had requirements that these officers must meet. There are ten vows they must make with regards to their theology and life practices. There are spiritual, ethical, and character standards identified in our *Book of Order* and in this new *Statement on Ordained Leadership and Program Staff*.

3. Is Bethany being pressured by the PC(USA) or the Seattle Presbytery to change our policy on same-sex relationships?

No. Churches are free to decide for themselves on this issue. No one in leadership has felt any pressure from any higher governing body in our denomination.

4. Why then did Session enter this discernment process?

A number of our Bethany members asked that we look into this. Elders listened to them and agreed that we needed a discernment process. In addition, the session felt it essential that the congregation be engaged in the work of discernment; this was not just work for the ordained leadership of the church.

5. Does the new *Statement on Ordained Leaders and Pastoral Staff* open the door for Bethany to someday ordain a church member who is in a committed, same-sex relationship?

Yes, it is a possibility. The new statement opens the door for Bethany to someday elect someone to ordained leadership who is in a committed, same-sex relationship. That decision, if it comes, is in the future and we can say with confidence that we have a process that the Holy Spirit can work through at that time.

6. What is the process for ordaining a church member?

A church member can be ordained as an elder or a deacon through the church's nomination process. Each year a Nominating Committee is elected by the congregation. The committee solicits the congregation for input on qualified future elders and deacons. The committee's process stretches throughout the entire year, and includes thorough discernment, prayer, and interaction with the church community. Near the end of this process, the committee approaches individual church members and asks them to serve in a specific role (a certain elder position or as a deacon). Finally, the committee assembles a slate of potential elders and deacons and submits it to the congregation to be voted on during a congregational meeting. Officers are elected by the congregation through a

majority vote. (See questions 10, 11 and 13 below for details on our Presbyterian process for electing church officers, elders, deacons, and pastors.)

7. Is ordained leadership open to everyone? Can any member become an ordained officer with no possibility of being excluded?

No. Only church members who meet the measures of the *Statement on Ordained Leadership and Program Staff* may be ordained. Furthermore, ordained officers make ordination vows, voicing their commitment to ten theological and ecclesiastical doctrines and principles in the Reformed Tradition. Church members, on the other hand, need not meet these standards. Nor do they voice commitments to these doctrines. Church members are basically required to profess one thing, their trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

It is also worth noting that the New Testament does not have a standardized list of prohibitions for leaders. The lists in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are similar but not the same. In terms of excluding individuals from the body of believers, the New Testament seems to apply prohibitions on a case by case basis, in an ad-hoc manner, rather than by standard policy. There are only two instances of exclusion: one having to do with sex (1 Corinthians 5:1-13) and the other centered around money (Acts 5:1-11).

8. Are there instances of this case by case exclusion today?

Yes, similar to the New Testament practice, the Church historically has excluded people from the body or from leadership on this case by case basis. This usually happens at the pastoral or nominating committee level.

For instance, at his former church, Pastor Doug, along with the session, had to exclude two people: one from worshiping with the congregation and another from remaining on session. At Bethany, Pastor Doug, with the session's approval, has excluded one person from worshiping with us. Two of these situations had to do with inappropriate sexual behavior (heterosexual); one involved a threat to the health and integrity of the worshiping body.

What's important to note is that none of these situations is described specifically in a list of prohibitions from the New Testament or any other source. The exclusion emerged from the ad-hoc application of ordination standards in those particular times and places with those particular individuals. No policy can cover all the possibilities of exclusion.

9. Are there examples in Bethany's history when a contentious issue has been part of leadership selection?

Yes, twice in recent memory. In the 1990s, the Associate Pastor Nominating Committee brought a female pastor to candidate for the position of Associate Pastor. After she preached and was excused from the room, discussion ensued. Some on the floor of the congregational meeting voiced that having a woman as a pastor was un-Biblical. A vote

was taken and a majority of the congregation voted to call this woman as our very first female pastor. One of the persons voicing opposition then announced that, though he was opposed in principle, he was very supportive of the congregation's process and ultimately its decision.

Before this event there was another instance when a contentious issue came up in leadership selection. A search committee presented to session a candidate for a pastoral staff position. The candidate had been divorced and was in a second marriage. Some on session raised concerns about how being divorced and remarried did not fit with Biblical standards. A discussion followed. The session hired the divorced person to the staff and those who voiced concerns were respectfully supportive of this staff person.

This kind of orderly process has opened Bethany to the work of the Holy Spirit and empowered us to face a variety of leadership selection challenges. We're confident it will serve us well in the future.

10. How is the Nominating Committee formed? And what is its role?

The Nominating Committee has seven members. The chair is a member of session, our 19 elder governing board. Another elder who is not currently serving on session is on the committee. The deacon board selects a deacon to serve on the Nominating Committee. And there are four members of the committee elected by the congregation. The philosophy here is that current leadership (deacon board or session) is not picking future leadership. This is a committee of the congregation and reports directly to the congregation.

When the Nominating Committee has prayerfully selected its slate of nominees for office it asks for a called congregational meeting where an election is held. The slate of nominees is published two weeks in advance of the meeting. There can also be nominations from the floor. After all the nominees are presented, the congregation votes.

From the *PCUSA Book of Order*:

G-2.401 Election of Ruling Elders and Deacons

Ruling elders and deacons are men and women elected by the congregation from among its members. The nomination and election of ruling elders and deacons shall express the rich diversity of the congregation's membership and shall guarantee participation and inclusiveness (F-1.0403). Ruling elders and deacons shall be nominated by a committee elected by the congregation, drawn from and representative of its membership. Congregations may provide by their own rule for a congregational nominating committee, provided that the committee shall consist of at least three active members of the congregation, and shall include at least one ruling elder who is currently serving on the session. The pastor shall serve ex officio and without vote. When elections are held, full opportunity shall always be given to the congregation for nomination from the floor of the congregational meeting by any active member of the congregation. A majority of all the active members present and voting shall be required to elect.

11. What are the ordained offices in the Presbyterian Church?

There are three ordained offices in the Presbyterian Church:

- Deacon: a ministry of caring.
- Elder: or *ruling elder*: 19 elders make up our session, the governing board which is responsible for all ministries of the church.
- Minister of Word and Sacrament or *teaching elder* (i.e., *pastor*).

12. How are non-ordained program staff persons hired?

Non-ordained program staff persons are hired by the session. The Personnel Committee, a committee of session, is authorized to appoint a search team. Upon the conclusion of the search team's work, the Personnel Committee submits the final candidate to session for its approval.

13. How does the new *Statement on Ordained Leaders and Pastoral Staff* impact our process for calling a new pastor in the future?

The focus of the proposed policy change is on how lay leaders are selected. Any future Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC) will consider the *Statement on Ordained Leadership and Program Staff*, and the current needs and makeup of the congregation when determining the requirements for a new pastor.

14. How are pastors called to Bethany?

In the PC (USA.), pastors are called by both the congregation and the presbytery. The process is designed to ensure that the PNC selects a pastor who is a fit for Bethany's theology, culture and practice. It begins when the session calls a congregational meeting for the purpose of electing a PNC. After the PNC has engaged in serious research as to the needs and mission of the congregation, it circulates a Church Information Form to the Seattle Presbytery which is then circulated through various avenues. Potential pastors send in resumes followed by interviews. When the PNC is ready to submit its candidate to be pastor, that person is presented to the congregation on a Sunday morning for an election. The congregation must vote to call the candidate as pastor. Presbytery approval is required as well. Technically, the pastor is a member of presbytery and not Bethany.

15. Will Bethany allow gay weddings on its property?

So far in this discernment season session has focused on two steps: revisiting the *Holiness and Leadership Statement* and equipping the session and the congregation with tools for engaging further across our differences. In a February 2015 memo to the congregation, session responded to a change in our denominational marriage standards by stating that, "Bethany's pastors and session continue to uphold our practice of only approving weddings between a man and a woman."

We recognize that Bethany may revisit the issue of same sex weddings at some point in the future. However, we recommend settling into our new *Statement on Theological Unity and Diversity* and leadership policy before considering any changes in our current policy on weddings.

It is important to recognize that there is a division of authority regarding the conduct of weddings. In our Presbyterian form of government pastors are given authority to discern whether or not a couple is ready to enter the covenant of marriage. However, the local session of a congregation has authority on how church property is to be used. Currently, session's policy does not allow the use of the sanctuary for weddings for same sex couples. When a wedding is not on church property, Presbyterian pastors are free, based on their own conscience and discernment, to decide whether or not they will marry a couple.