

***2017 Statement on Theological Unity
and Diversity at Bethany Presbyterian Church***
(Preliminary Draft for Congregational Input)

April 22, 2017

Listening for God's Leading

In Spring 2016 Bethany Presbyterian Church engaged in a four-phased communal discernment process, *Listening for God's Leading*. In the second phase, the session heard God give us a question to bring before the Lord:

“Given our diversity of positions on the issues of gay marriage and leadership standards, Lord God, what do you have to say to us about being united in Christ, providing a sanctuary (safe place) for all people, and learning to love each other across our differences with the same abundant love you continually give to us?”

The congregation met to bring this question before Jesus. The session took what was heard by the congregation and prayed through these themes. Here is what we heard God saying to Bethany:

We believe God is saying to us:

- **Be centered on and united in Christ.**
- **Open my sanctuary to all in a way that is both safe and holy.**
- **Be courageous in loving one another across differences.**

Through continued listening to God it became clear we should begin to take two steps in the fall of 2016:

1. **Revisit the Holiness and Leadership Statement**
2. **Equip the congregation and the session with tools for engaging this issue further**

This *2017 Statement on Theological Unity and Diversity at Bethany Presbyterian Church* is the session's attempt to fulfill this first step.

Background

Because Bethany Presbyterian Church is a church that waits on the Holy Spirit, we are not a static body. Our journey regarding gay Christians and the church reflects this.

In the early 1990s, a former Presbyterian minister who was gay began worshiping at Bethany with some hopes to help Bethany become a congregation that affirmed same-sex relationships. At that time, this would have meant a radical departure from Bethany's culture, theology and ethos. Although he was encouraged to continue to worship at Bethany and did so, this man was refused church membership, because Bethany's leadership believed that those in same-sex relationships did

not meet Bethany's membership standards at that time. This determination remained in effect for a decade.

Eventually, pastoral and elder leadership grew uncomfortable with the membership policy that specifically excluded people in same-sex relationships while ignoring those in extramarital heterosexual relationships. Did we have a double standard? The Holy Spirit was leading us on a journey. At that point, session affirmed that membership should be open to all who desired to follow Jesus with the understanding that we are all, those outside and those within the LGBTQ community, in the process of becoming whole in Christ. This affirmation aligned with the membership standards of our denomination's constitution.

Around the same time, in 2002, Bethany's *Holiness and Leadership Statement*, which identified standards for leadership on a number of issues including materialism, bigotry, sexual integrity, and pride, was approved. The statement prohibited people in same-sex relationships, as well as those in extramarital heterosexual relationships, from leadership. It was re-affirmed by session in 2006, and again in 2011. (Our own denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), at that time had a similar policy regarding ordained leadership, prohibiting those in same-sex relationships from being ordained. That denominational prohibition was lifted in 2012.)

Through a series of Roundtable discussions in 2015 and our five month-communal discernment process in 2016, the session is once again sensing the Holy Spirit leading us on a journey. At this point in our journey, the following statements outline our essential unity and our significant place of divergence.

Theological Unity and Diversity at Bethany Presbyterian Church

As a body of believers at Bethany we are:

United in our commitment to Jesus, and through him believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

United in our reliance on the free grace of Jesus Christ, this undeserved gift of a God who loves, seeks, and welcomes us while we are still lost in sin. We are called as a congregation to reflect Christ's welcome to all.

United in waiting on the Holy Spirit through prayer, listening and scripture study, anticipating that the Holy Spirit will guide us.

United in our confidence in the Bible as God's inspired Word and our rule for faith and life. The Bible was written by humans, but inspired by God through the Holy Spirit, and is God's authoritative written Word to us, pointing us to Christ and providing God's perspective on what it means to live faithfully as Christians.

United in our honesty about the power of sin to deceive and hold us captive. However, we are equally confident that the cross of Jesus has broken the power of sin.

United in the belief that the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are visible signs of God's grace, bearing witness to and offering a foretaste of the kingdom to come.

United in our corporate worship, bringing together the reformed/evangelical, contemplative, charismatic, holiness and social justice traditions.

United in our affirmation of the Apostle's Creed and the other historic Christian creeds.

United in placing a high value on lay leadership in all areas of ministry.

At the same time, as a body of believers we are:

Not United in our understanding/beliefs about the place of individuals in monogamous gay relationships in the life of the church. Some of us believe that the Bible gives clear prohibitions against homosexual acts and that Jesus followers may not be in a same sex relationship while still remaining faithful to our Lord. Others of us, while acknowledging these Biblical texts, believe they address ancient Roman and Greek homoerotic practices that were oppressive and idolatrous, rather than the monogamous, committed relationships of some in the Christian LGBTQ community. As a body of believers we are not of one mind on this matter, and we live in the tension of this reality. We are not completely comfortable in this place, but it is where we are. (A more detailed outline of the "historic" and "emerging" views can be found on our website.)

In the midst of this, we remain:

United in defining ourselves not at the boundaries of our faith, but, rather, at the center of our faith, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the "Word become flesh" whose life, death and resurrection announce God's victory over death and evil.

United in the belief that this One who overcame the God-human divide can bridge our divisions and empower us to be courageous in loving one another across our differences. Trusting in God, we remain committed to each other, praying that the Holy Spirit will empower us in mutual forbearance, patience and love as we learn from each other.

United in mission around our belief that God intends for our worshipping community to be grounded in God's love, centered on Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit in order to be a blessing to our world, our city and one another.

Leadership Selection

Today, we continue our practice of the last decade and a half of welcoming people from the LGBTQ community into our congregational life and membership. Moreover, when selecting leaders, we will no longer use the 2002 *Holiness and Leadership Statement*. As in the past, we will trust the Holy Spirit to guide us through a discernment process that will include prayer, scriptural guidance, and Presbyterian polity to determine our ordained leaders. That process now includes the standards for leadership outlined in the new *Statement on Ordained Leadership and Program Staff*. These standards will be used as the measure for future leaders by the Nominating Committee and ultimately by the congregation when it votes on church officers at congregational meetings. Staff search committees will also be guided by this statement.

Statement on Ordained Leadership and Program Staff**

At Bethany, our ordained officers and program staff should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be shaped by Scripture, testify to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit and be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the Church and in the world. They should be people of sound judgment, honest repute, sincere compassion, wisdom, brotherly and sisterly love and maturity of faith having demonstrated gifts in leadership. They should be sober-minded, temperate, hospitable, not quarrelsome and not recent converts.

Ordained officers (deacons, elders, and pastors) must have the approval of God's people in a congregational meeting. Program staff must have the approval of the session. Authority to approve all other non-ordained volunteers and leaders will rest with ministry area staff members and elders.

** Much of the content of this statement comes from 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1 and the PC(USA) Book of Order.