

How do we agree to disagree agreeably at Bethany Presbyterian Church?

By keeping Jesus and the foundational tenets of our shared faith at the center of our communal life, we believe we are empowered to be open and honest in the disputable matters on which we disagree. In the midst of this disagreement, 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**.

Rather than picking sides on every issue, we commit to seeking and following a "third way."

What do we mean by a "third way?"

A "third way" is a model for choosing to acknowledge and communicate differing viewpoints on potentially divisive issues without letting them divide our church family. It is a way to live together and love each other with our differences. We borrowed the term "third way" from Ken Wilson's book *A Letter to My Congregation*, which Session read in the context of the 2016-17 churchwide discussion about LGBTQ+ inclusion and leadership. It seeks to pursue an alternative path to the binary choices of the traditional (first way) and affirming (second way) approaches. Bethany has adopted the term third way but has defined and adapted it to serve Bethany's traditions, character, and history. Without giving it a name, Bethany has followed this approach for many years as we have navigated differences and made space for people and five Christian traditions: Reformed/ Evangelical; Charismatic; Holiness; Social Justice; and Contemplative. In 2020 the Bethany Session began a reflective, ongoing discussion about how to live into a third way. A "third way" is not so much a policy as it is a posture. It is not a static stance but an ongoing process of discernment to work out practices and policies about which we can either agree or agree to disagree.

Why do we need a third way?

We are all having the (non-uniquely) 21st-century Christian experience of witnessing God-fearing, Jesus-following, Spirit-filled, Bible-believing people we know, love, and respect – with whom we have been in Christian community and ministry for years – prayerfully reading the same Scripture we’re reading and coming away with a different understanding. A third way means acknowledging our different viewpoints and seeking to know, love, and respect each other more deeply by pressing on together in Christian community and ministry. Centering our lives on Christ and trusting that God is at work in each of us are the bases of our communal life. We trust one another to act in good faith and in the Spirit to work through our discernment processes. At Bethany we are choosing to resist the spirit of schism at work in the American Church by insisting on our unity in Christ over our unanimity in opinion. Mischaracterizing differing faithful Christian interpretations as biblical vs. unbiblical tends to drive a wedge between people who view the Bible as similarly authoritative when, instead, we should be learning from each other. What harms Christian community is not our differences, but quenching the Spirit that gives us diverse gifts by denying the Spirit at work in our differences. A third way means I recognize you as a fellow child of God, disciple of Christ, and temple of the Spirit, who is just as capable as I am of discerning God’s call and direction on your life.

Discernment happens in community, so we lean into that. We stay, we talk, we pray, we study, we serve together and watch for the fruit. We facilitate times for sensitive discussions while mindfully extending Christ’s inclusive invitation to the table. We all learn from each other. We all listen together. We strive for authentic worship, ministry, and relationships across our differences and avoid forming camps along dividing lines. We refuse to discount one another or question each other’s motives, intelligence, or integrity when we inevitably disagree. We live into the historic Christian declaration "in essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; in all things charity," believing that charity is the Christian corrective to uncertainty. Disagreement on uncertain things in uncertain times is the normative human condition; Bethany desires to be a church that thrives in such conditions.

What is the biblical basis for disagreeing agreeably?

Our approach to disagreements on disputable matters is very similar to what the apostle Paul addressed in Romans 14 when Gentile believers and Jewish believers in Jesus could not agree on the most divisive disputable issues 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, then provides three benchmark principles:

- **Stay true to your individual conscience.** *"Each person is free to follow the convictions of conscience" (Romans 14:5, The MESSAGE).*
- **Trust the other person to Jesus, their Lord.** *"Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand" (Romans 14:4, NRSV).*

- **Do not judge.** *“Each of us will be accountable to God. Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister”* (Romans 14:12-13, NRSV).

What’s an example of applying third way thinking at Bethany?

One example is how we are navigating our differing congregational beliefs about LGBTQ+ inclusion in the leadership of the church and the perspectives on the sanctity of LGBTQ+ relationships. In 2017, our Session removed the automatic exclusion of persons in non-heterosexual relationships for consideration for positions of leadership. We replaced the former leadership policy with new standards for ordained leadership and renewed our commitment, as in the past, to trust the Holy Spirit in our discernment process as carried out by the Nominating Committee and congregational election of leaders.

In a similar fashion, in 2023 we removed the automatic exclusion of church community members who are in LGBTQ+ relationships from having their wedding in our sanctuary. In removing this exclusion we are putting our trust in the process our church has always followed when it comes to who authorizes weddings: we authorize our pastors through prayer, turning to scripture and meeting with couples to determine if the couple can be married at Bethany. All weddings are then reported to Session.

Not all of our members agree with these changes. While we all look to God’s word and God’s Word (Jesus) in forming our beliefs on the subject, the subject itself is not a central tenet of the faith, of Scripture, or of Christ’s teachings. There are myriad faithful, informed readings of Scripture on many contemporary issues, and this is one of them. This is a particularly weighty issue, comprising core questions of identity and morality, and yet the matters on which we agree, which are central to our shared faith, far outweigh our differences. As such, we believe we can commit to being church together without being in full agreement on the subject. It is not unusual for families to hold different ideas on potentially divisive issues. We want to be a place in which the whole family of God feels welcome not only to worship, but also to participate fully in the life of the church and the walk of faith as God is calling them.