

Dear Bethany Presbyterian Church community,

In March 2023 Session appointed a task force of current elders to study Scripture and develop a new, positively framed wedding policy that would accommodate non-heterosexual weddings on Bethany's campus. This letter provides information about the task force's process and recommendations.

The task force was charged to be guided by the following principles:

- Humbly focus on Jesus as the center of our faith (Matthew 22:37-40)
- Honor covenant as a key concept for all relationships
- Look to Scripture to inform, guide, and shape a shared understanding (Psalm 119:105; 2 Timothy 3:16)
- Foster mutual respect and curiosity across differences, building on our prior "third way" work and modeling Romans 14
- Model love and welcome for all (1 Corinthians 13)

Here is some history of Bethany's journey regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion to provide a bit of context for the change in policy.

- In 2002, Session approved Bethany's *Holiness and Leadership Statement*, which identified standards for leadership and among other things, precluded from leadership people in same-sex relationships, as well as those in extramarital heterosexual relationships.
- The [2017 Statement on Ordained Leadership and Program Staff](#) removed automatic exclusions to leadership, named our theological disagreements, and put an emphasis on trusting our Holy Spirit-led, Presbyterian process for electing church officers. Since then, the congregation has elected several of our LGBTQ+ members to serve as elders on our Session. The wedding policy requiring that a couple wishing to wed at Bethany consist of a man and a woman remained unchanged at that time.
- In December 2022 Session decided to engage Renewal Ministries Northwest to facilitate a process of discernment.
- Renewal Ministries met with Session in February 2023, at which time we framed the question: "Lord Jesus, you are Lord of this church. Given that at Bethany we honor each person's freedom of conscience, and love across our differences, Lord, what are you saying to us, through Scripture and the Holy Spirit, about having non-heterosexual weddings in our sanctuary?"
- On March 4, 2023 we gathered for congregational discussion and communal discernment as an opportunity to listen to God and one another. We heard lament about those who, in light of these differences, have left our community or been hurt by past decisions. We recognize that our members hold diverse viewpoints, and we yearn to be a community that is a safe and welcoming space for all of us to live out our faith together.
- Renewal Ministries led continued discussion and discernment with Session on March 18, 2023, which led to the motion establishing a task force to craft a positively framed wedding policy which would accommodate non-heterosexual

weddings on Bethany's campus. The Wedding Policy Task Force members include Carrie Ngongo (chair), Jenn Cavanaugh, Frank Holman, Meghan Waddle and Pastor Doug Kelly.

The task force began the process by assembling, studying, and discussing a non-exhaustive reading list (appended) of relevant and diverse scripture passages, books, and articles to inform its work in preparing our proposed revisions to the following documents:

- [Bethany wedding policy](#)
- [LGBTQ+ at Bethany web page](#)
- [How we agree to disagree agreeably at Bethany](#)

The revisions to these documents now accommodate non-heterosexual weddings on the Bethany Presbyterian campus. LGBTQ+ Christians in our church community share a healthy and God-given desire for faithful, covenantal intimacy and partnership. We all need help in living out our promises. Making them publicly in the context of our church community through a Christian wedding service can be empowering in that regard. While we as a church recognize the diversity of biblical interpretations on the sanctity of same-sex marriages, we are striving to create a community in which all are free to live according to these diverse, yet faithful, beliefs. We want to support and bless the covenantal relationships of all our members and to encourage each other to make such covenants in the context of our community of faith.

Removing the qualification that a couple married at Bethany consist of a man and a woman makes more space for our pastors and parishioners to live and act in accordance with their individual Christian convictions. The new wedding policy retains other requirements for weddings, including the expectation that couples who get married are connected to our faith community as a source of pre-marital counseling, support, and accountability. Ultimately, at Bethany, and in our denomination, it is the individual pastor who decides whether or not to marry a couple.

Many in our Bethany family have studied the scriptures and church traditions long and carefully and have reached different conclusions on some issues, and particularly on the question of whether marriage should be limited to heterosexual couples. But as with our previous discernments on LGBTQ+ inclusion in church membership (2002) and leadership (2017), we conclude that this is a "disputable" issue about which faithful Christians may freely disagree while still pursuing life together in Christ. As the historic church adage goes: "In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, in all things, charity."

Ephesians 4 reminds us of the fundamental posture and practices of love toward one another that should guide our lives together and journey with Jesus:

"I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one

body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” [NIV]

As we seek to be humble and gentle with one another, loving across our differences, we continue to affirm these foundational and unifying truths of one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father, and one table. We choose to follow Paul’s guidance in Romans 14 and hold lightly to those matters over which faithful believers may disagree, especially if that disagreement threatens to undermine the unity of the Spirit.

In joining Bethany we each committed to belonging to Christ together, not to being like-minded on every subject. In a Third Way church, we accept that our adoption as children of God makes us family. Family doesn’t always agree, but we stick with each other. Churches and families are always making decisions that are potentially divisive. In a committed, covenantal relationship, just because a decision is made does not mean the conversation (or relationship) is over. The only way to forge a Third Way is one step at a time. This wedding policy change may feel like a big step, but it is one among many that we all continuously make as a community of faith. If any decision of the church disappoints—whether because it seems to go too far or not far enough in any one direction—consider it an invitation into deeper dialogue and spiritual discernment in community. The conversation will only be richer, more significant, and a more profound witness to the gospel and lordship of Christ as we all bring our differences to it while simultaneously committing to grow beyond mere tolerance into true care and respect for one another.

Bethany remains a welcoming congregation. Diverse views and the people who hold them are welcome here. No policy change carries any implied demands for homogenous thinking on this or any other subject. Rather, this is an attempt to make space for all of us to live according to our own Christian convictions. While the road has not always been smooth, the Holy Spirit has been faithful to Bethany in leading us in this journey of embracing our LGBTQ+ siblings in Christ while also naming our theological differences and loving each other across those differences. We pray that our commitment to unity in diversity will enhance our witness in a divided world.

Finally, Bethany welcomes and celebrates everyone, not only those seeking to marry. We endeavor to support all who are single as well as to make space for God to strengthen the marriages and families in our midst in their covenant bonds of love and peace.

Appendix: Wedding Policy Task Force Reading List

- Genesis 1 & 2 (especially Genesis 1:27 & Genesis 2:24)
- Exodus 20:1-17 (especially vs. 14 & 17)
- Leviticus 18
- Ruth
- Proverbs 5:18-19
- Isaiah 62:1-5
- Malachi 2:13-17
- Matthew 5:31
- Matthew 19
- Matthew 22
- Mark 10 (especially Mark 10:1-11)
- Mark 12:18-27
- Luke 16:18
- Luke 20:27-40
- John 2
- 1 Corinthians 7:1-9
- Galatians 3
- Ephesians 5
- 1 Timothy 4:1-5
- 1 Peter 3:1-7

Websites/ Articles/ Online chapters:

- [Fameofgodnamechap13.pdf \(wordpress.com\)](#) “The Mystery of Marriage”
- [Presbyterian Church \(U.S.A.\) - What same-sex marriage means to Presbyterians \(pcusa.org\)](#)
- [Presbyterian Mission Agency Our Challenging Way: Faithfulness, Sex, Ordination and Marriage | Theology and Worship | Presbyterian Mission Agency](#)
- [Reconciling Ministries \(rmnetwork.org\)](#)
- [The Reformation Project - Advancing LGBTQ Inclusion in the Church](#)
- [Resource Full Library - Reconciling Ministries \(rmnetwork.org\)](#)
- [Scriptural analogies encourage us to accept gay marriage \(gaychristian101.com\)](#)
- [Walter Brueggemann: How to read the Bible on homosexuality - Outreach](#)

Books:

- *God and Marriage* by Geoffrey William Bromiley
- *Holy Love, A Biblical Theology for Human Sexuality* by Rev. Dr. Steve Harper
- *Marriage, Scripture, and the Church: Traditional Discernment on the Question of Same-Sex Union* by Darrin W. Snyder Belousek
- *The Meaning of Marriage* by Tim & Kathy Keller
- *Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Marriage: Squaring the Circle* by Clare Herbert
- *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church*, edited by Preston Sprinkle