



FOUNDED IN 1642
"OLDEST PULPIT IN AMERICA"

FIRST CHURCH IN ALBANY

A National Historic Site

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A WELCOMING & AFFIRMING CONGREGATION

In response to God's unconditional love for all people made known to us in Jesus Christ, we are called to be a welcoming and affirming community. The First Church in Albany includes young and old, families, couples and singles, rich and poor, persons of various races, ethnicities, backgrounds, sexual orientations and gender identities, differing physical and mental abilities, believers and seekers. We welcome into the full life of the church all those whom God sends us. Centered in Christ, we commit ourselves to breaking down dividing walls and building a community where all are loved.

BACKGROUND

In 2007 our congregation undertook a long-range planning process. After a Joint Boards (elders, deacons and trustees) retreat in October 2006 and a series of interviews with many members of the congregation in early 2007, we identified five areas of strength. One of them was diversity. At a congregational gathering in March 2007 we brainstormed ways in which to build on those strengths. A long-range planning team then gathered all that information and developed more specific goals. One of them was to have the congregation go through "a process of discussion, guided by God's Word and Holy Spirit, about whether to adopt a statement" that we welcome into the full life of the church all people whom God sends us. The goals were presented to the congregation at a post-service luncheon in October 2007 and the Joint Boards approved the goals in December 2007.

In the fall of 2009 we conducted a series of open meetings to talk about being a fully welcoming congregation. The meetings included prayer, Bible study, discussion, and presentations by the Rev. Robert Luidens, member of the denominational task force on homosexuality, and by the Rev. Seth Kaper-Dale, co-pastor of the Highland Park Reformed Church, New Jersey, who spoke about the experience of that church in becoming a congregation that openly welcomes and affirms gay, lesbian and transgender persons. All of the meetings at First Church have been open

to all members and friends of the congregation. Summaries of some of those meetings and of the Bible study resources were made available on the Hospitality Table.

The above statement is a result of those discussions. Consistory adopted the statement in March 2010.

The questions and answers which follow also arose out of the discussions that were held last fall and early this year. The responses do not represent official positions of the consistory or presume to speak for the entire congregation. They are an attempt to help us think through the implications of adopting a welcoming and affirming statement and to assist the congregation in further discussion.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FOR DISCUSSION

Don't we welcome all people already? Is it even necessary to make a statement?

One of the strengths of our congregation is its diversity and the way all sorts of people have been welcomed into the life of our church, but that may not be well known outside our own congregation. Some Christian churches, including those in our own denomination, have made it clear that they do not fully welcome gay and lesbian persons. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender) people have been rejected and even persecuted in our society. Adopting a welcoming and affirming statement and letting it guide our actions is a way of following Christ's example of welcoming the outcasts.

Furthermore, in the process of discussing a possible welcoming statement for our church we have become aware of ways that we could be more welcoming, not only to gay and lesbian persons, but to others as well. We may not always be as fully welcoming as we think. We can do better. We hope that this statement will lead us in that direction.

Is it necessary to make a list of the ‘categories’ of people we welcome? We can never list everyone. Aren’t we unintentionally excluding some by listing others? Why not just say we welcome everyone?

The list is meant to be illustrative, not exhaustive. When the Apostle Paul wanted to affirm that “all are one in Christ” (Galatians 3:28) he prefaced it by saying, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female.” These were some of the social barriers in Paul’s time. The prophet Isaiah specifically mentions the foreigner and the eunuch as belonging among God’s people because these were categories of people who had formerly been excluded (Isaiah 56, Deuteronomy 23). Jesus began his public ministry by quoting from Isaiah 61 and naming the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed (Luke 4: 18-19.) When certain people have been previously singled out and excluded or discriminated against it is important to mention them by name in order to be clear that we mean to include them.

Why have the discussions focused especially on welcoming people of different sexual orientations and gender identities? Don’t we need to be concerned about welcoming other people who may also feel excluded?

We do need to be concerned about welcoming all people but in some parts of our society and in some churches, gay, lesbian and transgender people in particular have been singled out and made to feel excluded. The issue of welcoming these persons in the life of the church has been a controversial one in many denominations, including the Reformed Church in America. For these reasons it is important to devote time and attention to this issue and to be clear that these persons are welcomed in our church.

Are we welcoming and affirming in other areas of diversity?

Our congregation includes people from various races, educational backgrounds, walks of life, differing family configurations, young and old. The building is fully accessible. But in the course of our discussions we learned that there are probably ways we can be more welcoming—to the hearing and sight impaired, for example. Perhaps we would benefit from some frank discussions about race. There may be things we can change about some of our worship services or other programs or activities that can help more people feel more welcome.

What does it mean to be an “affirming” community? Who or what are we affirming?

We want to affirm all people, recognizing each person, regardless of background, circumstance or sexual orientation as God's beloved child, and therefore worthy of our respect, care and love.

What do we mean by the “full life of the church”?

We mean that participation in worship, the sacraments, volunteering in church activities or programs, serving on a church committee or board, being ordained to the office of elder or deacon, funerals, weddings, or offering other pastoral services of the church, will not be denied because of race, class, sexual orientation or any other such category. We also believe that that a diverse membership is a strength of the church and that by welcoming a variety of people into the full life of the church we become a stronger, more faithful congregation of Jesus Christ. A diversity of people with a diversity of gifts enriches our life together.

I thought the responsibility and authority for admitting people into the membership of the church belonged to the Board of Elders. Will that change?

The Board of Elders will continue to exercise the same responsibility and authority as they have in the past. They admit persons into membership, act on requests for baptism, and exercise responsible care and oversight of all the members including the ministers. The same vows and expectations would apply to all people requesting membership in the church.

Does this mean that a gay person or couple could present a child for baptism?

Each request for baptism is presented before the Board of Elders. As long as at least one of the parents or guardians is a member of the congregation and the couple or parent/guardian is able to faithfully and sincerely assume the vows of baptism, the Board of Elders would consider the request. The same vows and expectations would apply to all people requesting baptism for themselves or for their child.

Does this mean that a gay or lesbian person could be ordained a deacon or elder?

Yes, if duly nominated by the consistory and elected by the congregation and the person is able to faithfully and sincerely assume the vows of ordination. The same vows and expectations would apply to all people who are candidates for ordination.

Does this mean that a gay or lesbian couple could be married in our church?

When a couple comes to the church requesting marriage the pastor meets several times with the couple for pre-marital counseling, to plan the ceremony, and to help the couple prepare for married life together. The pastor may seek the counsel of the Board of Elders. The same vows and expectations would apply to all people who are seeking to be married –a promise to live in a committed, loving and just relationship marked by fidelity and permanency.

But are same-gender weddings even possible in New York?

Until and unless the laws of NY State are modified the marriage would not be recognized by the state. It would, however, be a marriage blessed by the church.

Does this mean we could call a gay or lesbian person to be our pastor?

Adopting this statement would not change the process for calling a minister. That remains the responsibility of the Joint Boards after receiving a recommendation from a search committee and seeking the mind of the congregation. If the Joint Boards approves we could call a gay or lesbian person to serve as our pastor. However, any call that a congregation extends to a minister must first be approved by the classis. And only the classis has the authority to ordain persons to the office of Minister of Word and Sacrament.

What if I don't agree that we should welcome gay, lesbian or transgender persons into the full life of the church?

This is an issue about which faithful Christians can honestly disagree and still remain members of the same congregation. Such disagreement can be uncomfortable and even painful at times, but we do not think that this issue should divide the church. Our congregation values diversity, including a diversity of opinion. In spite of our differing opinions and honest disagreements we can remain together and still love each other, still learn from each other, and still serve Christ together.

There are some passages in the Bible that say that homosexual behavior is a sin. How can we be a church “Reformed according to the Word of God” if we don’t follow the teachings of scripture?

In Genesis 19 (the story of Sodom) the men of the city ask Lot to bring out his guests “that we may know them.” (To “know” is sometimes a euphemism in the Bible for sexual intercourse.) The motive of the men may not have been so much to satisfy their sexual desires (it certainly does not imply a loving relationship between two people of the same sex) but rather an act of sexual abuse, and an exercise of power as a way as a way to humiliate them. In an effort to protect his guests Lot offers the men of the city his virgin daughters instead. This is a strange and sordid story and hardly the place to look for teachings on sexual morality. Before we assume the story is only or primarily about homosexual behavior it is important to look at how is it interpreted elsewhere in scripture.

Where the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is referred to elsewhere in scripture homosexuality is never specifically mentioned in association with it. The letter of Jude speaks of “sexual immorality and unnatural lust” (Jude 1:7.) The prophet Ezekiel lists the sins of Sodom as pride, excess of food, prosperous ease, and neglect of the poor (Ezekiel 16: 48-49.) When Jesus speaks of the sins of Sodom he speaks of the sin of inhospitality (Matthew 10:15.)

Passages in Leviticus 18 and 20 are a part of a section that contains the Holiness Code which also prohibits sowing a field with two kinds of seed and wearing a garment made of two different materials and various other ritual and moral guidelines. Part of the task of interpreting scripture is to distinguish which teachings are for all times and places and which are particular to a particular context of history, to discern that which is culture-bound (to Israel in the 10 century BC, for example) and that which is fundamental to faith in any age. To do that it is important to look at the whole sweep of scripture and at the bigger picture of what the Bible says about God’s relationship with human beings and the portrait of God we see most clearly in Jesus Christ.

The New Testament passages that are often cited as referring to homosexual behavior are all from the letters of Paul (Romans 1: 26-27; I Corinthians 6:9; I Timothy 1:10.) Many interpreters think that Paul was not talking about homosexuality per se, but was writing against male

prostitution and pedophilia, two common practices in the Roman culture of the day. Many think that Paul was condemning sexual abuse and sexual power and was not really addressing the situation of a same-gender, mutually loving and faithful relationships.

The word *homosexuality* is never used in scripture. There is no such word in ancient Greek and nothing is said about homosexual orientation as understood by modern science, nor is anything said about the loving relationship of two same-gender persons who have covenanted to be life partners. None of the scripture passages often cited as prohibiting homosexual behavior addresses same-gender relationships based on mutuality and respect and characterized by fidelity and commitment. And there is not a single word about homosexuality in the teachings of Jesus or in any of the four Gospels. The Bible takes much more seriously sins like injustice, greed and lack of compassion that it does sins having to do with sexual behavior.

Although there is no consensus among Christians about the interpretation of these passages, it is clear that the Bible devotes relatively little attention to this issue. A much more prominent theme in the Bible is the inclusive love of God (often over the resistance of God's people who want to restrict who belongs; see Isaiah 56, Acts 10 and 11, for example.) And an important work of the Holy Spirit seems to be changing people's minds about who is in and who is out. Jesus singled out for particular condemnation the wealthy, the powerful and the people concerned about ritual and moral purity, who were often the socially respectable people of his day, and stood with the outsiders, the poor, the disreputable and the fearful rather than with the self-confident and the self-righteous.

Will we be at variance with the policies of the Reformed Church in America if we welcome gay, lesbian or transgendered persons into the full life of our church?

Nothing in the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America (the *Book of Church Order*, the *Liturgy* and the *Standards of Unity* [the *Belgic Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the *Canons of the Synod of Dort*]) prohibits welcoming gay or lesbian persons into the life of the church. (They simply don't address the issue.) Some of the reports presented at previous General Synods have said that homosexual behavior (not homosexual orientation) is sinful. Certainly some homosexual behavior is sinful, as is some heterosexual behavior, but we do not think homosexual behavior per se is always sinful. In that respect many of us differ with some of the reports presented to the General Synod.

In 1990 the General Synod voted to adopt as the position of the Reformed Church in America that the practicing homosexual lifestyle is contrary to scripture, while at the same encouraging love and sensitivity towards such persons as fellow human beings. (*MGS 1990: 461*)

In 1994, General Synod voted to adopt another resolution addressing the church's relationship with homosexuals. The resolution stated: "The General Synod of the Reformed Church in America recognizes and confesses that the Reformed Church in America has failed to live up to its own statements regarding homosexuality in 1978 (*MGS 1978*, pp. 229-40), 1979 (*MGS 1979*, pp. 128-135), and 1990 (*MGS 1990*, R-11, p. 461). Few in the Reformed Church in America have creatively and lovingly spoken with persons with a homosexual orientation about the truths of Scripture and the hope of the gospel. Many have participated in or tolerated forms of speech and behavior which humiliate or degrade such persons. Many of the churches within the Reformed Church in America have not provided an environment where persons have felt the acceptance and freedom to struggle with hard issues involving sexual orientation. Many Reformed Church in America members have shown no interest in listening to their heartfelt cries as they struggle for self-acceptance and dignity. For all these wrongs, this General Synod expresses its humble and heartfelt repentance, and its desire to reflect the love of Christ to homosexual persons. In all that this General Synod does, it seeks to obey the whole of Scripture, demonstrating in its own life the same obedience it asks from others. It calls itself and the whole church to a greater faithfulness to Christ in relationships with persons of homosexual orientation."

More recently the RCA task force on homosexuality, after conducting a series of dialogues throughout the denomination, reported to the General Synod of 2009. (*MGS, 2009*, pp. 104-109) Part of that report stated: "Certainly, there is no consensus in the church regarding the antecedents of sexual orientation among humans, no consensus about whether same-sex unions can be faithful expressions of covenantal commitment, and no consensus about what ecclesiastical roles are appropriate for those who engage in homosexual practices. (Some participants in dialogue events would even deny certain civil rights to celibate persons of same-sex orientation, in contravention of the 1978 Commission on Theology paper.)"

The dialogue coordinator and steering committee recommended that the General Synod postpone further policy deliberations regarding homosexuality and that "it is wise to postpone further *Book of Church Order* proposals on the matter until additional local churches and classes become intentional about some form of dialogue. While some parts of the church were ready, even eager, for a dialogue on homosexuality, other areas were moderately to strongly resistant."

The report further stated that the dialogue process was "beneficial as a tool for helping participants understand and accept each other while simultaneously differing on emotionally loaded issues." And that while "some transformation took place in understanding, dialogue facilitators also saw strongly held, persistent differences in beliefs. Beyond that, and distressingly, the RCA is a church that has not implemented the pastoral care and ministry recommendations that the General Synod commended in 1979 regarding homosexual persons."

Also in 2009, the General Synod voted to affirm the value of continued dialogue and discernment on the topic of homosexuality, to encourage assemblies to refrain from disciplinary proceedings as a way of dealing with differing viewpoints on the issue, and to recommend that office holders and ministers avoid actions in violation of the policies of earlier statements of the General Synod. (*MGS 2009*, p. 236.)

In 2005 the Rev. Dr. Norman Kansfield, a Reformed Church minister and past president of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, was disciplined by the General Synod for officiating at the same-gender marriage of his daughter and her partner. If one of our pastors performs a same-gender wedding could he or she face similar consequences?

The Rev. Dr. Kansfield is a “General Synod Professor of Theology” and as such was under the care and supervision of the General Synod. Ordained and installed ministers in our church are under the care and supervision of the Classis of Albany. All ministers installed by the classis vow to “accept the church's order and governance, submitting to ecclesiastical discipline should [they] become delinquent in either life or doctrine.” When becoming a member of the classis, a minister also promises “to submit... to the counsel and admonition of the classis, always ready, with gentleness and reverence, to give an account of [his or her] understanding of the Christian faith.” In the potential case of officiating at a same-gender wedding ceremony, someone could formally complain to the classis and the classis would then have to determine whether or not that action violated the vows of ministry or the policies of the denomination.

How will this statement be used? How will this statement be communicated to those outside our congregation?

The statement can serve as a guide in our life together and especially for the consistory and the Board of Elders. We may publish the statement in church publications, including the newsletter and the church website. We may also decide to include the statement in public advertizing. Adopting a welcoming and affirming statement is only one part of a continuing process. We still have much to learn about being a welcoming and loving community and we hope this statement can help us do that. We think it already has. We are still growing in faith, in hope and in love. We still have much to learn about how to “welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed us.” (Romans 15:7)