

LOVE AND DIVERSITY

Response on Sexual Orientation

Highland Avenue Church of the Brethren, Elgin, Illinois

Introduction

After a careful discernment process the congregation approved two statements that express its thinking and convictions on sexual orientation. They are intended to guide our actions and to let those outside our congregation know who we are. We worked to find a way to affirm the deep differences in the congregation and to honor the strong majority position.

Therefore, we approved two statements. The first affirms the range of difference and agreement and pledges us to stay in fellowship and dialogue with one another. The second commits us to welcome and include those with a different sexual orientation and invites further dialogue with the goal of breaking down barriers.

DIFFERENCES, AGREEMENTS, AND COMMON GROUND

Approved May 22, 2005 in Congregational Business Meeting

We are a diverse congregation that is called to be a loving and compassionate church. We seek to love each other whether we agree or not. We accept all persons as fully valued individuals.

Understanding of Scripture

We take the Bible and especially the New Testament as our guide for faith and practice. We acknowledge that we are not of one mind regarding what scripture does and does not say. Some would call for us to find and adhere to scripture's literal meaning. Others would ask us to interpret scriptures in cultural context. We pledge to remain in good fellowship with members and participants in both these positions and with those in between. We agree to take scripture seriously and learn from it together.

Understanding of Sexuality

We believe that human sexuality is a gift from God. We are not of one mind on how our human sexuality may be expressed, particularly when it is oriented toward someone of the same sex. Some believe that same-sex orientation is not the original plan of God and that its expression is prohibited. Others believe it is given by God and can be lovingly expressed. We pledge to remain in good fellowship with members and participants in these different positions and with those in between and to continue to seek new light. We agree that we are called in all our relationships to love and respect and never to use or abuse the other person.

Evangelism and Acceptance

We believe that we are called to accept all persons who want to participate in and join our congregation and to help them find Christ's grace and a new and stronger relationship with God. We commit ourselves to make everyone feel fully welcomed and accepted. We will accept all persons and learn from each other even when others have views we cannot wholly agree with or a sexual orientation different from our own. We recognize that we do not always agree in our deep convictions of right and wrong. We will try to love one another before we judge. We will not allow one aspect of an individual to cause us to hurt or reject the whole person. We will make a special effort to reach out to and accept any other member who makes us uncomfortable. We agree to be in open dialogue with those we may have trouble agreeing with or accepting and to commit ourselves to learn and seek new light together.

Social Justice and Human Rights

We believe that God's love in Christ calls us to follow Jesus' example of standing with those who are rejected and marginalized in our society. Our members work for peace and social justice in different ways and with different levels of intensity. We agree to respect each individual conscience. We also agree to

reject violence and injustice in all forms. We pledge to oppose hate and discrimination against people of same-sex orientation.

Connection with the Larger Church

In Church of the Brethren polity individual members receive guidance on faith and practice from the congregational business meeting, the district conference, and Annual Conference. At the same time these decisions in the congregational business meeting, the district, and Annual Conference are made by the individual members. Thus there is a delicate interplay between individual conscience and the will of the body. We pledge as individuals and as a congregation to take the counsel of Annual Conference, district conference, and our own congregational business meeting with great seriousness, to hold each individual conscience in great respect, and to arrive at and enact our decisions with love and care. We recognize that situations may arise where individual members might find their conscience in opposition to the congregational business meeting, district conference, or Annual Conference. We also recognize that situations may arise where our congregation might find itself in opposition to district conference or Annual Conference. When we find any member or group within the congregation, district, or denomination in conflict with any other, we pledge to show love rather than to force compliance or push for separation. We promise to work to bring us all closer to one another in the congregation and closer to the denomination.

Good Decision-Making

We affirm in a diverse congregation that the way decisions are made is important for building up the body and avoiding division. We commit ourselves to stand together as we encourage one another to seek the mind of Christ. We commit ourselves to search our minds and hearts carefully and to give one another ample opportunity to speak. We pledge to listen respectfully to one another. We promise to respect different opinions and convictions. When there are matters where we are not of one mind, we pledge ourselves to let the Holy Spirit draw us together to be of one heart.

STATEMENT OF INCLUSION REGARDING SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Approved September 25, 2005 in Congregational Business Meeting

We are a congregation of believers called to live in loving relationships. We affirm our connection to one another, to the Church of the Brethren, to the larger church of Christ, and to all humanity.

We seek to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. We believe that every human being is a beloved child of God. We treasure the presence and gifts of each person regardless of age, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, race, or ethnicity. As we welcome persons with homosexual orientation, we know this will be difficult to accept for some in our congregation and in the larger church.

Further we believe that persons with homosexual orientation have been blessed with gifts for ministry and leadership. Recognizing the guidance of God's Spirit in Acts 15, where the universality of the Gospel is affirmed, we embrace what God has blessed.

Together we seek to break down the barriers that divide people and share our love of God and neighbor with the world. We believe the matter of sexual orientation deeply divides Christians. We wish to bridge this gap. We invite Christians everywhere to engage in further study and discernment.

These two statements are public documents and may be used by members and groups in the congregation as any other congregationally approved statement would be used—in the wisdom and spirit with which they were formed.