

# Discernment Committee, Church Board Respond to Questions from Regional Leadership

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You may remember that after FBC chose to join the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, Rev. Steve Bills, executive minister of the American Baptist Churches of the Central Pacific Coast, sent us three questions he said were often posed to him from churches that don't identify as welcoming and affirming of LGBTQIA+ people. He asked us to respond, so that he might know our perspective, and be better equipped to respond when those questions came to him. The Discernment Committee (consisting of Bill Apel, Mike Burr, David Ferry, Joel Kiff, Robin Knauerhase, Gary Langenwalter, Erika Marksbury, Shelly Sanderlin, JoAnn Sims, Charlie Walker, and Don Watson) drafted answers to his questions, and with some very slight edits, the Church Board approved our answers and sent them on. We wanted to share them with you, so what follows is Steve's first question to us, in italics, and our response in plain type below. In the August issue of *The Tidings* we will print his second question and our response, and the third will appear in September's issue. Please contact Erika ([erika@fbcmac.org](mailto:erika@fbcmac.org)) or any member of the Discernment Committee if you have questions.

*1.) When you say you are welcoming and affirming, what is it exactly that you are affirming? Is there a point to which an LBGTO person might go in the expression of their gender or sexuality where you would have to say that you could no longer affirm that expression?*

We affirm people. We believe sexuality and gender identity are gifts of God and expressions of the diversity of God's own self. We affirm the faith journeys of all of our congregants, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or other qualifiers, and we value and cherish the contributions each one brings to our church family. The introduction of our church's mission statement reads, "We seek to offer a deep sense of community to all those within and beyond the walls of our church." This sense of community is possible, we believe, when everyone who might come already knows that they are accepted, as they are, as one of God's beloved children.

We hear this unconditional welcome echoed in the mission statements of our region and our denomination, which state, respectively,

- "The heart of the gospel is God's redemptive love. In our life together, the world will see the power of forgiveness to overcome alienation, the strength of love to transform hate, the power of grace to break the bonds of guilt, the triumph of hope over despair, and the victory of faith over doubt. Through the cross of Christ we embrace the world as neighbor" ([www.abccpc.org](http://www.abccpc.org)) and
- "We affirm that God through Jesus Christ calls us to be: ... an inclusive people: who, gifted by a variety of backgrounds, find unity in diversity and diversity in unity; who embrace a pluralism of race, ethnicity, and gender; and who acknowledge that there are individual differences of conviction and theology." ([www.abc-usa.org](http://www.abc-usa.org))

We wonder if, with the second part of this question, you're asking us about behaviors. We affirm not behaviors but people, and their identity as God's own. Sexuality and gender identity are only a part of who people are; such characteristics do not determine the whole of anyone's identity. When any person among us acts out of accord with what we would hope for from someone who professes to share our faith, we do what we can to mend what has been broken, extend forgiveness, and restore relationships.

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*2.) Our congregation's theology of human sexuality is based on what we see in the Bible as consistently discouraging and disapproving of sexual relationships outside of marriage in general, and of all homosexual relationships in particular. Help us to understand the path you have taken to where you are now encouraging us to consider affirming such expressions of human sexuality.*

FBC McMinnville is deeply committed to the timeless truths witnessed to in scripture. We read an ethic of love undergirding the whole canon – the love of God who made us all and seeks to be in relationship with us; the love we are called to share with every friend, neighbor, and stranger; the love we are to embody, as a church, for all the world.

The American Baptist principle of “Bible freedom” encourages each believer to search the scriptures for themselves, and our denominational mission statement asserts that the Bible is to be “interpreted responsibly under the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit within the community of faith.” Careful exegesis, that pays attention to the time, setting, culture, and concerns of the writers, as well as context within the whole of God’s word, often yields an interpretation more nuanced than an initial reading might give. The Sodom and Gomorrah story, for example, is about hospitality, not homosexuality, in Jesus’ own interpretation of it in Matthew 10. The references to “unnatural relations” in the first chapter Romans are thought by scholars to be about abusive and exploitative temple prostitution practices, not about committed, loving, same-gender relationships.

In addition to careful study of scripture, our path has included getting to know and understand the stories of all of the people in our congregation, regardless (and inclusive) of their sexual orientations and gender identities. We have known, and continue to know, people of all identities as friends, as teachers, as spiritual mentors, as committed followers of Christ and servants of the church. We have believed the testimonies of our LGBTQ+ friends that their sexual orientation and/or gender identity is not chosen but biologically determined. Science also affirms the biological determination of these characteristics. Because LGBTQ+ Christians are members of our faith community, their realities have become one more factor informing our collective textual interpretation and theological reflection.

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*3.) Marriage in the Bible is always seen as between a biological male and a biological female. There are instances where some men might have multiple simultaneous marriages (polygamy), but even those marriages follow the male-female pattern. We see this as being in harmony with the origin of marriage in Genesis and with Jesus' teaching about marriage when He was questioned about divorce in the Gospels. Although our culture and our government have moved from this traditional characterization of marriage, we feel pressured by the empire to apply a church or kingdom blessing to same-sex unions. What can you tell us that might help us overcome our reluctance?*

Our understanding of marriage varies significantly from what we know of marriage in the Biblical context(s). That form of "traditional" marriage was often primarily about family/clan concerns, and did not take into consideration choice, consent, companionship, affection, love, or even what we now consider basic human rights. We do not believe it would be consistent with the teachings of the Bible to copy patterns of marriage we see in the Hebrew scriptures, that assume ownership of women and deal-making as part of their processes. Instead, we look to the ethical dimensions of what God intends when two people are joined in the covenantal bonds of marriage: a model like the one witnessed to in 1st Corinthians 13, where those who love are generous and mutually self-sacrificing, regardless of gender.

That said, within our American Baptist tradition, and within other traditions as well, pastors have always been able to join people in marriage, or not, at their discretion. At FBC McMinnville, we apply the same standards to an LGBTQ+ couple's request to be married as we would any other: how thoughtfully is this union being entered into? What kinds of counseling have been done, or need to be done, to prepare for life together? Is this union the true desire of both parties? We understand marriage to be a voluntary commitment entered into by two consenting, loving adults, and where we see that commitment on display, it is an honor to participate in the blessing of it.

We understand weddings, like baptisms and baby blessings, to be significant statements to the community about a person's (or a couple's) intentions – and coming to a church for a wedding signifies an intention to invite and celebrate God's presence in a couple's life. We also view weddings as settings where both pastor and congregation are called on to witness to the best of our tradition – settings where pastoral care is paramount, where the love and participation of a community are invited to shine, where people will be folded deeper into the life of faith, or encouraged outside of it, depending on the response of the church they ask to share these moments with. Weddings are not chances for us to judge – that's not our role – they are chance for us to join in deepened communion with those who choose to share their joy.