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The Fellowship of Presbyterians

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Scott Mann, Associate Pastor for Discipleship
Bellevue Presbyterian (Bellevue, WA)

Carl Pearson, Elder
University Presbyterian (Seattle, WA)

Mike Nieto, Associate Pastor Covenant Presbyterian Church (Boise)

H. Stanley Wood

The Fellowship of Presbyterians Key Summary Points

Mission: to build flourishing churches that make disciples of Jesus Christ

Beginnings: January 2011

Contact: The Fellowship of Presbyterians

502-425-4630

8134 New La Grange Rd Louisville, KY 40222

Current Size: about 230 churches plus 120 individuals

Why Formed? FOP leadership observes that the PCUSA has been losing members for more than 40 years and that the ongoing disputes over theology and bureaucracy have created a culture of contention and diminished the focus and energy of the core mission of the PCUSA. FOP is an effort to refocus the energies of their respective churches on the core mission as stated above.

Relationship with ECO? ECO is an outgrowth of FOP. FOP has provided until just recently the office administration for ECO.

Relationship with Presbyterians for Renewal? These two organizations will be united by the end of 2014.

Theology: Strong emphasis on Reformed Theology: authority of scripture and the value of the historic confessions of the church. FOP has produced a paper titled *The Fellowship Theology Project* in which the value and importance of theology is asserted, the importance of taking seriously the confessions of the church is emphasized and the "essential tenets" of the faith are stated.

What is required for membership? Membership is available to both individuals and congregations. The following is required:

1) must agree that the *essential tenets* as stated in the *Theology Project* are a reliable guide to identifying and explaining the core teachings of

- our confessional heritage
- 2) sign the FOP covenant statement
- 3) Pastors must participate in a Pastor Covenant Group
- 4) Sessions must participate in a Mission Affinity Group
- 5) Congregations must provide prayer and financial support (\$250/year)
- 6) Membership is open to non PCUSA congregations

Goal: Build a network of churches both in the PCUSA and outside that create a community, accountable to each other, that focus all their energies on making disciples of Jesus Christ.

Common reasons for joining:

- 1) Wish to reaffirm the theological, confessional and missional heritage of the church
- 2) Wish to "link arms" with like minded congregations
- 3) Want to partner with other churches
- 4) Wish to have a clear statement of faith
- 5) Wish to remain in the denomination while resisting its drift away from the historic faith

Memo from the BelPres Session

May 19, 2014

BelPres is a Jesus church. We are committed to following Jesus and taking part in his rescue mission to the world as we participate with Jesus to revive the Eastside and beyond. Our essential identity at BelPres continues to be focused on Jesus, His loving Kingdom and the authoritative Word of God. Despite changes in our culture, we remain strongly committed to who we are and what we believe. Our guiding philosophy is that we take a strong position on Jesus and the authority of scripture; on all other issues we prefer to have conversations because how the lordship of Jesus and the authority of scripture gets worked out in the complexity of our lives requires relationship.

We work with many ministry partners as we seek to be faithful disciples. One of our important ministry partners is our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Every two years the PC(USA) convenes a General Assembly where representatives from presbyteries around the country gather to address many issues. Every General Assembly makes decisions that encourage and disappoint people on all sides of any theological or political spectrum. Christians often find themselves in various forms of disagreement. This is normal since the days of the New Testament and should be expected.

This year General Assembly will be addressing a number of questions relating to the definition of marriage and to how the denomination will respond to the changes in marriage practices in our culture. However, its actions do not change how our pastors and session understand the Bible's teaching on sexuality and marriage. More information can be found here. An update to the 2014 General Assembly is posted here.

At BelPres we want to keep Jesus at the center of all we do and say. We urge you to join us in this mission of love as we seek to be radically devoted to Jesus, each other, and to healing our world.

Linda Mauzy, Clerk of Session Rev. Dr. Scott Dudley, Senior Pastor Bellevue Presbyterian Church

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BelPres Leadership within PC(USA)

June 2012 [Reaffirmed May 19, 2014]

The session of BelPres is committed to providing leadership within our denomination and this statement is intended to provide information and context about the current situation. The Presbyterian Church (USA) is experiencing significant challenges right now. Some of these challenges are necessary and welcome. Other challenges concern us deeply, fostering confusion and serving to distract from the ministry to which Jesus has called His Church. The pastors and elders of First Presbyterian Church of Bellevue are actively engaged in welcoming and encouraging positive changes in our congregation and denomination while at the same time we feel called to provide appropriate, biblical leadership to the controversies with which our denomination is struggling.

Challenges We Welcome

Sharing the unchanging gospel of Jesus in a changing culture (click here to expand)

 We believe the good news of Jesus Christ is for everyone in every culture in every generation. Jesus died for our sins to reconcile us to God and he rose from the dead proving his victory over sin, death and evil. We believe every person needs to be saved by personal faith in Jesus as Leader and Forgiver. Those who follow Jesus are transformed by the Holy Spirit from the inside out and participate with God's purposes in spreading Jesus' loving Kingdom throughout the world. This gospel does not change but challenges various cultures in various ways. Our culture currently values pluralism and relativistic tolerance to a large degree but these cultural values conflict substantially with the teachings of Jesus who repeatedly claimed to be the only way to salvation. Regardless of how cultural values change over time, Christians are called to live in light of the gospel, faithfully given to us in the Scriptures.

- We believe the Bible is the authoritative Word of God to humanity. Its teachings are to be
 obeyed. So we are committed to studying and teaching the Bible in ways that help disciples
 of Jesus understand and obey it even when obedience is counter cultural.
- We acknowledge that the Christian Church in the West has enjoyed significant cultural authority and influence since the days of Constantine. The Church no longer enjoys this type of cultural authority in much of the world, including the West. This is a significant challenge to the Western Church as it seeks to adjust to this new reality. Many aspects of this new reality are welcome as the Church recommits to seeking Jesus and His kingdom first even when that means cultural alienation, suffering or persecution for the sake of the gospel. We welcome an unprecedented opportunity to show the real Jesus as Christians are shaped by God's Spirit and Word and live as an alternative community of salt and light in a world desperately in need of God's love and salvation.
- We welcome our denominational headquarters' new initiative to start at least 1001 new churches, signaling a commitment of funds, time and personnel to evangelism and church planting.
- We welcome efforts within our denomination to encourage pastors, elders, deacons and other church leaders to be educated in and to affirm historic biblical teaching and to engage in personal practices like daily bible study and prayer.

Partnering for more effective witness (click here to expand)

- Regional Church Partnerships—BelPres for years has been working for revival with other likeminded churches on the Eastside with emphasis on church unity, serving our communities and strengthening marriages.
- Seattle Committee of Correspondence—BelPres is a founding member of this group which gathers local likeminded PCUSA pastors and elders working to uphold biblical faithfulness in our Presbytery and denomination; hosted at BelPres regularly. This committee works closely with our Presbytery leadership and stays current with other groups like the Fellowship of Presbyterians.
- Missions & Outreach partnerships—BelPres continues to strengthen missional partnerships
 with organizations including the City of Bellevue, Jubilee REACH, Eastside Academy,
 Kidreach, Congregations for the Homeless, Rwanda Center for Champions and many others
 as well as many missionaries to better show our world the real Jesus.

Presbyterian Coalition—BelPres appreciates the support provided by various PC(USA)
organizations like the Coalition which provide information to likeminded churches
advocating biblical faithfulness.

Emphasis on strengthening leadership especially younger leaders (click here to expand)

- BelPres School of Ministry—developing new efforts to provide training and support to people exploring vocational ministry
- BelPres Leadership Development—increasing training opportunities and support for elders, staff, deacons, nominating committee and other key leaders
- Strengthening BelPres Young Adult Ministry—increasing visibility and support for our young adult ministry
- PC(USA) denominational headquarters—hired outstanding senior leadership in key areas including Presbyterian Foundation CEO, Deputy Executive Director of Mission Council, Director of Evangelism and Church Growth, Director of Theology, Worship & Education among others
- PC(USA) denominational headquarters—hired new Young Adult Catalyst position with plans to triple engagement of young adults in churches; also expanding Young Adult Volunteer program
- PC(USA) denominational headquarters—refocusing funding, staffing and programs to support pastoral ministry candidates

Controversies That Concern Us

We are deeply concerned about the trend in our denomination to apply prevailing cultural values rather than Biblical teaching to provide guidance in addressing contemporary issues. This is particularly a concern with regard to the General Assembly, the national body composed of delegates elected from each Presbytery, that meets every other year to vote on denominational policies.

2014 General Assembly Update

Update on General Assembly 2014

by Rev. Scott Mann, 2014 GA Observer

The General Assembly of our denomination took action on all manner of issues including many which received less media attention along with the two most controversial and publicized issues: marriage and Israel/Palestine. As expected Christians disagreed on many issues after much consultation and debate. However the spirit of the Assembly was marked by Christian forbearance and respect despite disagreement.

It is our prayer that BelPres will be marked by the same spirit of Christian love as these actions cause some to rejoice and others to mourn. Like most churches, our congregation represents a wider diversity of opinion on many matters than the consensus that the leadership has arrived at after prayer and discussion. I am grateful BelPres sent me as an observer and for the opportunities I had to influence the outcomes to greater or lesser degrees. Below are my reflections on the GA decisions most directly relevant to our BelPres congregation.

Marriage—Overall the GA approved allowing, but not requiring, same gender marriage where it is legal and does not violate the consciences of pastors or sessions. This change is effective immediately and will also be sent to presbyteries for inclusion in the constitution next year. The BelPres session and pastoral leadership have been engaging this issue in a variety of ways especially in the last six months as we anticipated this possibility at GA. BelPres' leadership approved a memo (available here (http://belpres.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Memo-from-the-BelPres-Session.5.2014.pdf)) explaining that the GA's decision does not change how our pastors and session understand the Bible's teaching on sexuality and marriage. BelPres pastors will continue to perform Christian marriages between one man and one woman. More information is available here (http://belpres.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Statement-on-Scripture-Sexuality-and-Leadership-v11.pdf).

Israel/Palestine—GA again sought to advocate for peace in the Middle East and particularly in Israel/Palestine including reaffirming Israel's right to exist, Palestinian human rights, a two state solution, positive investment, and PCUSA's interfaith dialogues. GA also called for divestment in three companies whose products are seen to be used for non-peaceful purposes and GA strongly distanced this action from being construed or represented as divestment from the State of Israel or an alignment with or endorsement of the global BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanction) Movement.

Vital PCUSA ministry and mission—BelPres affirms a number of priorities affirmed by our denomination including the burgeoning 1001 new church planting initiative as well as renewed and growing initiatives with young adults, missional living, vocational engagement, and others. The PCUSA missions program is also doing outstanding work and seeing great results.

Reconfiguring synods—GA required that our present 16 synods be reduced to 10-12. We are pleased with our synod, which although quite large geographically (AK, WA, northern ID) is also quite lean and serves our presbyteries well. We at BelPres and Seattle Presbytery are unlikely to be impacted by this GA action.

The leadership of BelPres is grateful for our PCUSA and Fellowship relationships which assist us in various ways to pursue the mission Jesus has given BelPres. Although there may be disagreements at times on various important issues, we are committed to following Jesus, loving one another and not allowing disagreements to distract us from the ministry to which God has called us.

I welcome the opportunity to interpret any of GA's discussion/actions and answer any questions or concerns. Thank you for seeking to be radically devoted to Jesus, to one another and to serving the world.

Worship Service Times

Traditional: 9 am & 11 am

Modern: 9:45 am, 11 am & 6 pm

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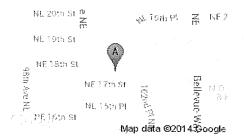
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AFFILIATION WITH THE FELLOWSHIP OF PRESBYTERIANS FAQ

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Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) June 2012

[Reaffirmed May 19, 2014]

Contact Us

If you would like more information about what we believe or about our denomination, please contact Rev. Scott Mann at smann@belpres.org (mailto:smann@belpres.org) or by calling the Church Office at (425) 454-3082.

What is the Missional vision of BelPres?

BelPres has a strategic plan referred to as our church Roadmap, created by the leadership of our church and approved by session annually with monthly and quarterly reviews. For more information about the road map click here.

How do partnerships and affiliations help us pursue our mission?

Partnerships of various kinds provide BelPres with the opportunity to give and receive resources—expertise, personnel, funding, programs, research/best practices, etc.—which are far beyond what we are able to share without these partnerships. Partners benefit from the experience and efforts of one another to maximize their efforts to pursue their mission. Partnerships can also be an expression of like-mindedness, a unity of some common purpose without requiring uniformity or agreement on all issues.

In what partnerships and affiliations is BelPres participating?

BelPres enjoys many partnerships including all of our missionaries and missions organizations which function as our congregation's extended family and reflect our church family's beliefs and values. BelPres partners with many organizations to deep mutual benefit including Jubilee REACH (http://www.jubileereach.org/joomla/), Center for Champions Rwanda (http://www.africanenterprise.org/about/ae-teams/ae-rwanda/item/21-center-for-champions), Young Life (http://www.younglife.org/us), Youth for Christ (http://www.yfc.net/), Alpha (http://www.alphausa.org/Groups/1000045892/Northwest.aspx) and more. Other affiliations include:

- Presbyterian Church (USA)— national denomination (http://www.pcusa.org/), regional synod (http://www.synodnw.org/), local presbytery of Seattle (http://www.seattlepresbytery.org/)
- Willow Creek Association (http://www.willowcreek.com/)
- Re:New Homes for Youth
 (http://belpres.org.luminouscreative.net/Connect/EAYouthHomes.ashx?p=2224) with
 Eastside Academy and Seattle's Union Gospel Mission
- · Sticky Faith Project (http://stickyfaith.org/) with Fuller Seminary
- Confessing Church (http://belpres.org.luminouscreative.net/?p=2110) movement
- Samaritan Center of Puget Sound (http://www.samaritanps.org/)
- 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness
- Eastside Interfaith Social Concerns Council
- · Evangelicals Serving Cambodia
- Missions Fest Seattle (http://missionsfestseattle.org/), Association of Church Missions
 Pastors & Mission Pastors Pacific Northwest

What is the Fellowship of Presbyterians?

The mission of the Fellowship of Presbyterians (http://www.fellowship-pres.org/) is to build flourishing churches that make disciples of Jesus Christ. The Fellowship of Presbyterians is a new organization that has roots in several other previous PC(USA) groups such as the Tall Steeples, a group of large evangelical PC(USA) churches, with which BelPres has long been affiliated. The Fellowship is an umbrella association, in and beyond the current PC(USA), through which members

can share ideas, ministry resources, and missional strategy. The Fellowship invites Presbyterians to affiliate in order to connect, grow, and pursue a common mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ while sharing a Presbyterian, Reformed, Evangelical heritage. Rather than being preoccupied by unfruitful theological disputes or church bureaucracy, the Fellowship seeks to help churches focus instead on actively pursuing mission and ministry.

How does affiliating with the Fellowship of Presbyterians help us pursue our mission?

Affiliating with the Fellowship strengthens our efforts as well as share what we are learning and doing with others more effectively. BelPres is deeply engaged with the kinds of mission and ministry envisioned by the Fellowship. BelPres' purpose to participate with Jesus to revive the Eastside and beyond is entirely consistent with the purposes of the Fellowship. Affiliation provides additional clarity about some of our church's theological positions, allowing BelPres a helpful degree of differentiation from parts of the Presbyterian Church (USA) with whom we disagree while retaining the benefits of our membership in PC(USA).

Who has affiliated with the Fellowship of Presbyterians?

Many of the large Presbyterian churches with whom we have historically maintained close relationships have affiliated or their senior pastors have affiliated such as Menlo Park PC, Bel Air PC, Hollywood PC, First PC Colorado Springs, St. Andrew S PC Newport Beach, Solana Beach PC, Peach Tree PC, Christ PC Edina, First PC Houston, Highland Park PC, Memorial Drive PC, and First PC Orfando to name a few. For a current list, see the Fellowship of Presbyterian website (http://www.fellowship-pres.org/supporters/).

What does affiliation mean for our congregation?

Because the pastors and elders of BelPres are already committed to and engaged in living out the theology, mission and ministry which the Fellowship encourages and nurtures, our congregation may not experience much change at all. There is an annual Fellowship membership fee of \$250 per congregation.

What does affiliation mean for leaders of our congregation?

Affiliation:

- Reinforces and strengthens our missional emphases
- Strengthens our relationships with and accountability to likeminded others—churches, pastors and leaders within and beyond PC(USA)

- Required session to affirm the Covenant (http://www.fellowship-pres.org/wp-content/uploads/Session-and-Congregational-Covenant.pdf), a grateful response to God's salvation and our commitment to personal spiritual practices and attitudes
- Required session to affirm the Fellowship's Essential Tenets (http://www.fellowship-pres.org/wp-content/uploads/Theology10.pdf), a distillation of the biblical theology articulated in the PC(USA)'s Book of Confessions (http://www.pcusa.org/resource/book-of-confessions/).

What decision-making process has led BelPres to consider affiliating with the Fellowship?

The Fellowship began to be organized in 2011 but BelPres has enjoyed relationships with those involved for decades. Beginning in 2011 BelPres allocated personnel and funding to bring a recommendation concerning whether to affiliate or not to session when the time seemed right. In August 2011 and January 2012, Rev. Scott Mann and Elder Page Brenner attended national Fellowship Gatherings and, with BelPres' Presbyterian Relations Team, have researched this option since early 2011. On May 3, 2012 the Presbyterian Relations Team made a unanimous recommendation that session vote to affiliate with the Fellowship on June 25, before General Assembly convenes June 30. On May 24, BelPres pastors and executive team both voted unanimously to recommend affiliation. Session has been briefed or had discussions several times including December, January, February, April, May, a special called session meeting June 11, and on June 25, Session voted to affiliate.

What is BelPres' perspective toward our national PC(USA) denomination?

Please click here for our June 2012 [Reaffirmed March 24, 2014] statement addressing this question.

Is BelPres considering leaving the PC(USA)?

We are not currently discussing leaving our denomination for several reasons. First, we believe that unity is very important to Jesus and at this point nothing our denomination has done prevents our congregation from living under the authority of scripture as we see it, and pursuing the mission that Jesus gives us as a church. Second, our denomination is in a significant season of change—the present moment and the future are unclear—so we intend to take one faithful step at a time as the Holy Spirit shapes the future and we discern the purposes of God and how to cooperate. Third, leaving the denomination would require a significant amount of time, energy and attention that would distract BelPres from our main vision, which is to partner with Jesus to bring revival to the Eastside and beyond.

Does BelPres take positions concerning various cultural, political and social issues that arise?

BelPres teaching on various subjects in scripture can be found on our searchable website in podcasts and transcripts of past preaching and teaching or people are encouraged to speak with one of our pastors. BelPres is committed to preaching Jesus Christ and keeping the cross central in our worship and life together. We preach and teach from the Bible from a Reformed and evangelical perspective, dealing with various issues as they are addressed in the Biblical text. We encourage our congregation to follow Jesus as Forgiver and Leader and allow the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth as Jesus promised, recognizing that every Christian is on a journey of growing in knowledge and submission to Jesus and we are called to mutual love and forbearance throughout this process. Occasionally statements will be added to the BelPres website which we hope will prove helpful to our congregation and the larger Church. Click here for the June 2012 statement on Scripture, Sexuality and Church Leadership.

How can I learn more?

Click on the links in this document for more information at various websites. You are also welcome to contact Rev. Scott Mann (mailto:smann@belpres.org), Associate Pastor for Discipleship, at smann@belpres.org (mailto:smann@belpres.org) or (425) 454-3082.

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Statement on BelPres Understanding of Scripture, Sexuality and Christian Leadership

At BelPres, our leadership believes all Christians are bound by scripture so that whatever scripture teaches, we must teach as best we understand it even if it challenges our predominant non-Christian culture or contemporary American church culture.

We believe Scripture teaches that we are saved by faith in Jesus and not by our own obedience.

Therefore, we teach the gospel of grace which saves sinners and invite people to trust Jesus as Leader and Forgiver and become Christians. We welcome all people as part of our community of faith regardless of where they are in their spiritual journey or of any behaviors they are engaged in.

We believe Scripture teaches that all sin destroys life. Jesus showed mercy toward acknowledged sinners and judgment toward the self-righteous, whose sins were more culturally accepted or somewhat less visible such as pride, greed, envy, apathy, hatred, dissention, gluttony, and so on.

Therefore we teach Christians to recognize and renounce sin in all its forms, without prejudice or emphasis on sexual sins as worse than other sins before God. And we teach Christians to humbly accept Christ's mercy given through the cross and pursue holiness in all of life through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

We believe Scripture teaches that sexual holiness is expressed through faithfulness within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman as established at creation by God or through embracing a celibate life as established in the new covenant by Jesus, who experienced human desires but without sin.

Therefore we teach Christians to submit their sexual desires (whether hetero- or homosexual) to God and pursue holiness and wholeness as defined by scripture and demonstrated by Jesus and the apostles. A Forum on this topic is here. Our pastors perform Christian weddings which marry a man and a woman.

We believe Scripture teaches that God's people are to demonstrate love to all people: other Christians, family members, neighbors, strangers, immigrants, and even enemies regardless of other people's age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, economic resources, nationality, and moral choices. Indeed, scripture teaches that Christians are citizens of Christ's Kingdom, salt and light and a blessing to the world, and to imitate Jesus as he demonstrated love to the poor, the sinful and the outsiders of his culture, rejecting prejudice and bigotry, as He was guided by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, we teach Christians to demonstrate love to the poor, the sinful and the outsiders in our culture rejecting prejudice and bigotry, as we are guided by the Holy Spirit. We teach that Christians may be led by the Holy Spirit to quite different ways of living out Christ's call to love their neighbor in our fallen world which does not affirm Christian beliefs.

We believe Scripture teaches that all believers will not always agree so are called to be completely humble, gentle, patient, and to bear with one another in love as we all mature in faith and wait upon God to make clear what isn't yet clear or clear to some. Indeed scripture teaches that members of Christ's Body are to honor the other members in their different gifts and specific calling.

Therefore we teach Christians to seek unity, disagree respectfully, and in all things seek to submit ourselves to the authority of Scripture. Scripture, not our own opinions or culture's dictates, is to be our rule.

We believe Scripture teaches that leaders of the church are called to maintain a higher standard of faith and obedience and that leaders who sin and repent are to be forgiven and may be removed from leadership until a restoration process is complete.

Therefore, we teach Christian leaders to confess their sins to God and a trusted counselor, and to be forgiven, restored, and made whole through the power of the Holy Spirit. Any ordained leaders (deacons, elders, pastors) who do not acknowledge as sin any behavior that scripture calls sin shall not serve in an ordained leadership role.

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October 13, 2006

Forum on Homosexuality and the Bible

Summary: We affirm that God loves all people, and wants all people to experience His grace. We welcome all people as part of our community of faith here at FPCB, regardless of where they are in their spiritual journey or of any behaviors they are engaged in. We also affirm that for our own good, to help us live life to the fullest, God has given us His commands which are meant not to circumscribe our lives, but fulfill them. His commands tell us what things bring life and what things bring death. As our designer He knows better than we do what is good for us, even if it seems difficult for us to do. Wherever homosexual behavior (as opposed to simply feelings) is mentioned in Scripture (without exception) it is defined as a sin (that is, missing the mark of God's intended best for us). Where scripture is unequivocal, we are unequivocal. Homosexual behavior is not God's best for us.

We recognize that people who experience homosexual desires do not choose these desires. We believe, however, that God wants to bring these people to wholeness as defined by His word to us in scripture. For the homosexual person that might mean choosing a life of meaningful, vital celibacy surrounded by a community of close Christian friends. It could mean entering into marriage with someone of the opposite sex, leaving behind homosexual behavior, and choosing instead intimacy with their wife or husband. As long as there is no deceit and nothing hidden in the relationship, many people find these marriages very fulfilling (some in our own church). In some cases, it may mean finding freedom from homosexual desire.

Everyone is welcome to be part of the community at FPCB no matter where they are in their journey of faith, regardless of what behaviors -- sexual or otherwise -- they engage in. All are welcome into our community. However, scripture is clear that when it comes to leadership within the church there is a different standard. Therefore, we do not put people into ordained leadership at FPCB (Deacons, Pastors, Elders) who repeatedly engage in behavior that scripture calls sin. We all sin, but if there is no repentance, nor any willingness to name as sin that which scripture defines as sin, we do not believe that person should be in the highest levels of leadership. That applies not just to homosexual behavior (as opposed to feelings), but anything that scripture names as sin. This applies, however, only to the highest levels of leadership. Again, all are welcome into the community regardless of behavior, beliefs, or where they are at in their spiritual journey.

Forum on Homosexuality and the Bible

Lord, I pray that you would select the words that I say, and that you would help me say those things which would most accurately reflect your heart on this topic. Lord I pray that you would help all of us to hear really only what you have to say, and not what anyone else has to say. Lord, I pray that in the discussion, as we listen to each other, we could listen as brothers and sisters in Christ, respectfully. Lord I pray also that you would help us to hear your voice in the conversation, because yours is the one we want to follow. We pray this in the name of Jesus, amen.

I want to thank all of you for being here. As you know, this is a bit of a hot topic, a bit of a controversial topic. I'm glad you're here. I prefer to do this in a forum, mostly because it allows you a chance to talk back and to have dialog. I know in this church there are a wide variety of opinions on the subject, and just scanning those of you who are here, I know there are a wide variety of opinions in the room. What I'm going to do is I'm going to take about an hour to talk about what I see in scripture as it relates to this issue. For those of you who are still awake after that hour, we'll have conversation, and you can give me your feedback, your push back, your questions, your disagreements. We are a church where it is cool to disagree with the pastors: that is okay. There is no litmus test here. We are all trying to figure this out together in Jesus. So feel free to disagree; feel free to agree, as well.

Where I want to start, and to me this is important, is with an apology. The first thing I want to say as a Christian to anyone in this room who has struggled personally with the issue of homosexuality in your own life, or maybe you have a friend or a family member who has struggled with homosexuality, the first thing I want to say is, I'm sorry. I apologize for all the ways that Christians have failed to show the real face of Jesus to you, in all kinds of different ways. I'm a Christian, and I take responsibility for that. I know that I have probably failed to show the real face of Jesus to people who were struggling with the issue of homosexuality either in their lives, or in their families, or with their friends. So I want to say I'm sorry, I apologize. And I apologize in advance if I say anything hurtful. I don't mean to. And I know there's a great deal of pain around this topic, I know there's a great deal of woundedness around this topic, and I know that that pain is probably in this room. My goal, what I hope to do, is to show what scripture says about this issue, and then maybe give some suggestions for how we then live. I hope the Holy Spirit helps me do this.

The second thing I want to say, is to state very clearly that if you struggle with the issue of homosexuality in your life, you are welcome in this church. You are wanted in this church. You are loved in this church, and no one should judge you in this church, and I want to make that very clear. I will go on to say what I think

scripture says about this subject, but I want you to hear that. If you struggle with this issue, you are welcome in this church.

As I said, my goal is to show as best I can what scripture says about this, and then we'll have some conversation. Just a couple disclaimers: it's possible that I might irritate you at one point or another. As I've said in the announcement, when I've done this in the past I've managed to irritate everybody in the room at one point, no matter what you think about this topic. I expect to do something similar tonight. Then you'll get a chance to push back. I have a couple requests. The first is that you would listen to the whole of what I have to say. Sometimes on this issue, as a preacher, people will pick one part of what you say and turn it into the whole thing. As I've said, I'm going to talk for almost an hour and I ask that you listen to the whole of it and not take one part out of the context of the rest of it. Also, before you go out of this room and quote me, for the sake of the unity of this church, could you please make sure that you heard what I was saying and what I meant? Just so that we're all clear on the communication. And again, you'll have a chance to push back.

I want to start with two working premises: the first is that on this topic, the two extremes that I see played out in the media are both not Biblical and wrong. On the one side of this issue you get sort of the super-judgmental, "you're really an awful person if you have homosexual desires," there's this condemnation, this judgment. I don't think that represents what the Bible has to say about it. But I think the other extreme is also wrong, where you hear people say, "Well, you know, this is good, and God approves, and God made you this way." I think neither of those extremes really captures what Scripture says. The second premise that is going to work through all of this, everything I have to say in the next hour, is that the laws that God lays down in Scripture are meant for our good, not to make us miserable. When God gives us a law, even though it's hard to follow, even though it might not feel natural at first, it's not meant to make us miserable. Those two premises will govern everything I say.

I want to start with two passages of Scripture, both out of the Gospel of John. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Grace and truth, both. And we as Christians are forever falling off the horse on one side of that another, aren't we? You've got the Christian community truth people, who always want to tell you the truth, and make sure you know how much of a sinner you are, and want you to understand the Bible doesn't like what you're doing. Then on the other side in the Christian community, you've got people like me who tend to be grace people, "Oh, that's okay. God forgives you. I love you." Both are true, you've got to have both together, and in some kind of equal

proportions. Grace and truth. Finally, if you don't have both, you don't have either. If you're only telling the truth all the time, truth truth truth, then it's not really the truth, because you're not talking about the Grace of God, and that's also true. Also, no one's going to hear you because your truth is getting in the way and you're so obnoxious about it. If all your doing is grace, well finally that's not grace, because part of grace is being given the power to lead new lives. So if you're not having both truth and grace in perspective you have, at the end of the day, neither truth nor grace. You need both truth and grace, especially when approaching an issue like this.

I want to look at a passage where this plays out. You know the passage very well. "At dawn, he [Jesus] appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" Truth. They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them. "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw stones at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this those who heard began to go away, one at a time, the older ones first, (probably because they had accumulated more sin over their lifetime, they just had longer to do it,) until only Jesus was left. The woman still standing there, Jesus asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir." "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now, and leave your life of sin."

That last sentence is the balance just right: neither do I condemn you, but go and be whole in the Grace of God. Grace and truth. What I love about this story is like so many other times when Jesus was presented with a false binary choice. "should we stone her or let her go," he just figured out a different answer. "Is it A. or is it C?" Jesus just kind of goes, "No, it's not either A, or C. It's not even B in the middle, sort of a compromise. It's a banana." It's a whole different paradigm. It's something you've never thought of before. It's not the mushy middle. It's not A, it's not C, it's when he was presented with a false binary, he just came up with a third way. One of the things I want to challenge us tonight is, we need to be people of the third way. Can we be people who get that balance of grace and truth right, and not some kind of mushed out compromise, but just something that is completely different. "Woman, who condemns you? ... Neither do I, go and sin no more." And the reason he says go and sin no more is not because he's thinking, "oh, you're a horrible, terrible, wicked woman." For her own good, he says leave this life of sin. Let me define the word "sin" because in our culture I think it's come to mean sort of, icky, horrible, disgusting person, and we kind of apply it to people like Hitler

and that's about it. "Sin" in the Greek word for "sin" was originally an archery term. and it meant "to fail to hit the bull's eye." So if you shot an arrow and it deviated and didn't quite get in the center, that was a "sin," you missed the bull's eye, you sinned. That comes down in our understanding morally: to "sin" is to fail to hit the bull's eye of God's intended best for us. To "sin" is to fall short of what God intends for us, of becoming everything that he intended us to be. It's not to say, "oh, you horrible, terrible person." Again, God gives us the rules he gives us not to make us miserable, but ultimately to make us whole and fulfilled, even if the rules make it harder, even if the rules prohibits something that may feel good to us. A simple analogy would be: it feels very good to me to eat four dozen chocolate chip cookies in a sitting. And I can - it's astonishing. But it is not good for me. I don't want to trivialize the pain around homosexuality, again, as I started with that apology, in the middle I want to be cognizant of the fact that we Christians have often stepped all over people on this issue and caused pain, and I want to keep that apology out there. I don't mean to trivialize it. But I do want to say that God will often call us to something that can be hard for our own good, and sin is when we miss his intended best for us and for the people around us.

So let's look at what scripture says about homosexuality. This section is the "truth" section of this talk. Some of the passages I'm going to read are going to sound harsh to our modern ears, there's going to be some truth, but hang on, grace is coming toward the end. To start with, scripture has almost nothing to say on the subject. Very little. There are relatively few passages that directly speak to homosexuality. Jesus said absolutely zero about it. There are far more passages about not gossiping, and far, far, far, far more passages about caring for the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized, than there are about homosexuality. That said, there are more passages about homosexuality than some people would care to admit. There are about fourteen, depending upon opinions. There are at least fourteen that directly mention homosexuality in scripture, and another six that seem to mention it indirectly. About twenty passages in all. I'm not going to give the whole list here, but I can give it to you. If you email me, I'll send you the list. Before I look at what some of these passages say, I just want to state emphatically it is not a sin according to scripture to feel homosexual feelings. Behavior is always what is at stake in Scripture, and you'll see that in the passages. It's not the feelings, it's not necessarily sexual orientation, it's the behavior, it's what you do, it's acting on it that Scripture speaks to. I'm going to keep saying this to be clear, if you are personally dealing with homosexual feelings you are welcome in this church. You are welcome in this church. All of have sin. None of us get up every morning or go to bed at night and say, "I really hit a bull's eye today, didn't I, morally speaking." None of us do that. So the ground is level at the foot of the cross. All of us need to find Jesus.

Let me look briefly at just a few of the scripture passages that talk about homosexual behavior. Genesis 19. This is Lot in Sodom and Gomorrah: Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom, both young and old, surrounded the house. They called to Lot, [he had some male visitors with him, they were actually probably angels or messengers from God,] "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out so that we can have sex with them." Lot went outside to meet them, and shut the door behind him. And he said, "No, my friends. Don't do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof."

Now the first thing to notice is that Lot is an absolutely horrendous human being at this point. I mean, he is failing to hit the bull's eye in a big way. This isn't an "oops," this is obscene, what he says there. Let that be a caution to the Christian community. In his zeal against homosexual behavior, he became horrific morally. It can happen. We need to be very careful. That said, though, it is also clear from this passage that homosexual behavior is viewed as sin.

Next passage, Leviticus 18, this is repeated in Leviticus 20: "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman. That is detestable." Again, notice the act is detestable, not the person. The person is not considered detestable, it's the action.

I Corinthians 6. Taking a longer passage out of this. "The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already." Paul is chastising the Corinthians. You've heard me say this before: Someday I want to preach a sermon series on Corinthians. I want to call it, "This Church is Crazy." Because it's just like the craziest church, they're doing all kinds of things. And Paul is taking them to task on it. "Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers. Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexual offenders, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the spirit of our God." Two things about this passage: Homosexuality is listed as a sin, but so are a lot of other things. including slander, suing people, all kinds of stuff. The second thing to notice about this passage is there's grace, and redemption, and forgiveness, and wholeness. I love that phrase: "But such were some of you, until God called you, and washed you and cleansed you."

Romans 1, a long passage, I'm going to read the whole context. "For although they knew God they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their

thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man, and birds, and animals, and reptiles." So, idolatry. "Therefore God gave them over to the sinful desires of their hearts, to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the creator, who is forever praised. Because of this God gave them over to their shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women, and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God. he gave them over to a depraved mind; to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful. They invent ways of doing evil. They disobey their parents. They are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decrees that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things, but also approve of those who practice them."

Again, notice homosexuality is listed as a sin, but in context of a lot of other behaviors. I would wager that every person in this room could find themselves somewhere in that list. And most of us could probably find ourselves in two or three places in this list. It's just one of many. The second thing to notice is, again, the feelings aren't condemned but the behavior is listed as sin. But even here in Romans, homosexual behavior is not the whole issue. The main issue is idolatry. The main issue is walking away from God. The main issue is taking our cues from created things rather than from the creator. That's the main issue. And it leads to all kinds of problems in human beings. There's that long list. What Paul is trying to say in this passage is our lives, our happiness, our wholeness is not to be defined by what we do sexually, it's defined by God.

I think one of the places where I feel like the way we approach this subject in contemporary culture is perhaps the most broken and far from Biblical truth, is the statement or the phrase, "I am gay." You hear people say that. Using the "to be" verb, the verb of ultimate identity, to define yourself, rather than saying, "I do homosexual behaviors," or "I do heterosexual behaviors," we say, "I am gay," or "I am straight," "I am," as though that were the essence of our identity. That is what Paul is really after here. We do not take our cues, we do not take our identity from created things, from what we do sexually or anything else. We take our identity from God. "I am a child of God redeemed in Jesus Christ." That is my identity. What I do is another thing. The idea that our identity is somehow wrapped up in

what we do sexually is Freud, not the Bible. And we have decided that Freud was crazy about most things. So why are we still following him here? Our culture really does believe that the worst fate in life is never to have sex, and that what we do sexually is somehow who we are. I think what Paul is saying is, "No, that is a tragic form of idolatry, and it leads to all kinds of things, including homosexual behavior."

Those are just a few of the passages that mention homosexuality. Again, there are about twenty in all. In every single one of those passages, homosexual behavior is described as a sin, without one exception. Sin again in the sense of missing God's intended best. And again, also, sin for which there is grace, redemption, forgiveness, wholeness, second chances. And sin in the sense that we are all sinners, no one's better, no one's worse, the ground is level at the foot of the cross. But what the Bible says without exception, whenever it mentions homosexual behavior, without exception, is that it falls short of God's intended best for us as human beings.

Now, let me take some objections to the argument I just made, that homosexuality is sin. Let me talk about them, objections you will hear. "That isn't fair. They can't help it. They're born that way. How could God call it a sin when they can't control what they are feeling? Why should they be prohibited from acting on it, since they were probably born with it?" A lot of that is probably true in a certain way. I don't think that homosexuals choose it. As a pastor in the Bay Area I had five or six different people who I counseled through this issue in their lives, a couple of students, and a couple of adult men. I've watched this unfold in human lives five or six different times, and none of those people chose it. I'm not sure people would want to ever choose it. Why would you choose it? So can we please get over the idea that people just wake up one day and decide to do this? That's just isn't the experience, at least of the five or six folks I have counseled through this issue with. Exactly what causes it we don't know. There's a lot that's vague. Is it nature? Is it nurture? It depends who funds the study, frankly, and what their political agenda is. There's data on both sides. It's probably, in my opinion, I'm not a scientist, just taking a guess, multifactored. When I was a Stanford I knew a pair of identical twins, same genes, exact same genes, one was gay, one was straight. And in fact a lot of the identical twin studies bear that out, where there is one gay identical twin, the other one is usually straight. There may be a genetic component. I think that there's probably a genetic component, there's some evidence that suggests there is. But it seems to me that maybe it's mutifactored, that it may be an analogy more like alcoholism: maybe there's a genetic predisposition, and then life experiences will affect the outcome of that. But we don't know. What we know is there almost certainly not "choosing" it. So is it fair? They can't help it!

Theologically, and again, this is a theological answer, all kinds of things happen that aren't fair to us. We live in a fallen world. Our bodies are broken by sin and fallen from what they originally were. That means all kinds of things don't work the way God wanted them to. People are born blind, or they get cancer. Those aren't good things. God doesn't say it's a good thing. He says that's a result of sin. We get broken by other human beings. Other human beings hurt us and harm us. That's a result of sin. Somehow this happens in a fallen world. God doesn't like it. God didn't want it. God one day is going to set it right. Even in this life God can make us whole. But it still is not God's intended best. It falls short of God's intended best for us.

Not what I want to say parenthetically is, for those of us who are straight, we need to realize the exceptionally heavy cross that the homosexual person has to bear, particularly in our culture. Yes, it's the result of a fallen world, not what God intended, but it is a very, very painful, heavy cross to bear. I think that those of us who are heterosexual, when we deal with our gay brothers and sisters, we should have two responses. One is compassion. One is admiration, for the courage it takes to carry that exceptionally heavy cross. We've all got our stuff. But this stuff just weighs a lot, and I think we need to have compassion and admiration for that.

It isn't fair, you're right. God wants to heal that not fairness. God wants to heal that brokenness. That what sin is: it's not what God intended.

Second objection: "You know, the Bible is outdated on this issue. These are just old-fashioned notions. We've progressed. Let's just ignore it. Let's ignore those parts of the Bible. They don't apply today anymore. It was cultural back then." I don't believe anything in the Bible is outdated. Now, I think everything needs to be read in the context of the whole Bible, but I get very nervous about saying, "This part of the Bible applies, and this part doesn't." Here's the reason: if we start picking and choosing, then who's our God? We are our God. God is not our God. The advantage of revealed religion, that is, religion that God reveals to us, as opposed to religion that we make up, the advantage of revealed religion is that it can critique us, it can change our behavior, it can say, "No, this is wrong, and this is right." If we start making those decisions, then our God becomes our culture, not God. And I think it's a very dangerous slope to say, "This applies, and this doesn't." Where do you draw the line? Well, I guess that we can ignore the poor. Why not? It's cultural. We're rich. It's their problem. I just think that's a slippery slope. We need to take the Bible as a whole.

Another objection: "This is a civil rights issue." You hear this one a lot. "Look, we've loosened up conventional wisdom and thinking about women, and minorities. This is the exact same thing." Particularly in the Presbyterian Church as the debate rages over whether or not to ordain practicing homosexuals, you will hear this a lot. "Well, we've progressed when it comes to women and minorities;

we need to catch up here." I think there's a huge difference. I think there's a gigantic difference, and it's this. You can find passages in Scripture where women lead. You can find passages in Scripture where women teach. You can find passages in Scripture where women teach men. Deborah is the leader of Israel in the Old Testament. First Corinthians, Priscilla and Aquila instruct Apollos. Romans 16 a woman named Junia is mentioned as an Apostle. Women were the first preachers of the resurrection. Yes, there are passages in Scripture that would say that women shouldn't be pastors. There are those passages. And there are others that indicate that well, they probably could and should be. Where the Bible expresses a multiplicity of opinions, we are free to choose, based on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But where the Bible is univocal, we are constrained to obey, in my opinion. In my opinion. When it comes to the issue of women, and women in ministry, women in leadership, the Bible expresses two opinions. When it comes to the issue of homosexuality, wherever it is mentioned, without exception, it is mentioned as a sin, falling short of God's intended best. If there were one exception, I'd be giving a different talk tonight. If there were one exception. And sometimes I wish there were, it would make this talk easier in our culture. But there isn't. There isn't. And I think there are good reasons for that. So I don't think it's the same as women, or minorities. Nowhere in Scripture is it considered a sin to be a woman, or a minority. Slavery is tolerated in Scripture, but nowhere does it say it's a good thing. And Paul even says, if you can get out of it, get out of it. It's sort of lived with as an evil in the world. Nowhere is it affirmed as good. No, women can lead. But univocal when it comes to the issue of homosexuality.

"The Bible is really talking about a different kind of homosexuality when it mentions it. It's talking about Greco-Roman pederasty, is what it's really after." This is a common argument that you'll hear, that the homosexuality of Paul's day was really more pederastic, and that's what Paul's condemning. There is some truth in that. Greco-Roman culture, particularly in Greece, it was very common among affluent men to have a teen-age lover for a while, sort of considered a rite of passage in affluent Athenian society especially. So there's some truth in that. But the problem is, the Bible is capable, and the Greek is capable of distinguishing between boys and men, and wherever it's mentioned it seems to be talking about adult males to adult males, or adult women to adult women. The Old Testament knew nothing about pederasty or Greco-Roman culture, so the Old Testament certainly is not referring to that, it didn't exist when the Old Testament was written. It feels like a heavy dose of "reading into" the passage and highly speculative to say, "Oh Paul must be talking about this," when there is no textual evidence to bear that out.

"This isn't what Jesus would do. Come on. Jesus was tolerant. Jesus affirmed everyone. Jesus accepted everyone." That is true. That is true. Jesus was all of those things. And he also called people to be whole in him. He did both grace and

truth. So I think, again, if we can get the balance right, we are walking as Jesus would walk.

"We don't follow other parts of Scripture – why follow this?" Like the old joke where pastor is out with one of his parishioners and they're golfing, and the parishioner slices the ball and starts cussing, and the pastor looks at him, and the parishioner says, "Oh, it doesn't matter, Pastor. I cuss a little you pray a little. Neither one of us mean anything by it." Yes, we all sin and fall short of the glory of God, absolutely. But we are still called to turn away from it. Yes, there are things we don't do any more. Leviticus has a mind boggling, numbing array of laws. Many of them we don't follow, like, don't put cotton and wool together. Like a sort of divine wardrobe guide, or something. Don't eat shell fish or pork. Women wear a veil. Yeah. Here's the thing, though. Wherever we are ignoring Levitical dietary laws, women wearing veils, there is another passage in Scripture that would allow us to do it. God himself suspends all the dietary laws in the New Testament, because they don't apply anymore. God himself suspends all kinds of ceremonial laws, says they don't apply in the New Covenant. God never changes his moral law, ever. So where we are saying, "well women don't wear veils anymore," there's another passage in Scripture which allows us to do that. Again, where the Bible has a multiplicity of opinions we are free to choose. Where the Bible has one opinion I believe we are constrained to obey.

"God is doing a new thing." The analogy to the Gentiles in Acts. In Acts, the Jews thought the Gentiles were accursed. They wouldn't have anything to do with them. They were sinners. God brings in the Gentiles. Many people have argued, "Couldn't this be the same thing? God is doing a new thing. Just like he opened the Jewish temple to Gentiles, might he not be opening the church to people today?" This is the best of the bunch, as far as I'm concerned. This is the best argument, that the people who would argue differently from me have. I think this is a very strong argument. Again, here's my problem with it. Here's why I ultimately find it not convincing, although I do think there's something really intelligent about it. Again, God including the Gentiles was something he had wanted to do from Genesis chapter 12 on. It's all over the Old Testament. The Jews just weren't doing it. So the supposedly new thing God was doing by including the Gentiles wasn't new at all. It was very old. They just hadn't been doing it. Again, Scripture indicates all along that this new thing was what God had planned all along. With homosexuality you can't find that. You can't find any scriptural warrant for that.

The last one, "What's really wrong with it? Come on, they're not hurting anybody. It feels natural to them. Why do we make a big deal about it? There's nothing really wrong with it." There's a couple of things that I would want to say in response to that. I think, again, homosexual desire isn't wrong, it's behavior that we're talking about. But I think it does fall short of God's intended best in a couple

of ways. And parenthetically, the other thing that I want to say is the goal here is not to be heterosexual, either. The goal is to be Christo-sexual for all of us. I'm not sure that every sexual act inside marriage between a man and a woman is good by God. I think there's plenty of sin that goes on in the marriage bed too, if it's selfcentered, manipulative, all kinds of things. So the goal isn't to go from homosexual to heterosexual, we're all in this boat together trying to put our sexuality under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, all of us. All of us. When it comes to homosexuality. though, I think there's a couple of things where it falls short of what God intended. One, God created us Male and Female. Somehow, male and female together, we capture more of who God is than apart. And sex was given to us as a gift to get us off our own little island of self. The reason that he created us male and female so that we would have to cross over our self to a different gender, often feels like a different species, sometimes, and have to figure out how to have unity with this person who experiences the world so differently than we do. And that is good for our soul, because it gets us out of self, and into someone else. That is God's intention for sexuality. The problem, the place where I think that homosexuality falls short of that, is it's just a little bit more narcissistic. You get the world, you see the world, you're in the same kind of body I'm in. You kind of experience the world in the same kind of way that I do. Of course there are still differences there, but there's something just a little narcissistic about it. I think that's why it falls short. God intended sex to be this true intimacy where we get out of self, cross over to the other, and still find unity. The other thing, and this comes from my experience having counseled intensely with these five or six different people, and more than that on a one or two times counseling basis, what all of them without exception have told me, including the ones that are sort of saying "I think it's okay," is that their homosexuality, they feel, is also part of a deeper woundedness inside of them, particularly when I have talked to male homosexuals, they have described it as part of a bigger issue for them, about feeling included in the community of men. Oftentimes they will tell stories of feeling excluded or unloved by their father in some pretty significant ways, or by peers. The "or" is important. If you are the parents of a gay child, I did not just say you caused it, okay? I just want to make sure you understand that. Somewhere along the line, either peers or family or whatever, these men will talk about feeling, "I just didn't feel like I belonged, that became a deep wound in me." Or they will talk about fear of men, they were perpetually bullied, or fear of father, that was a wound. And they eroticized the fear, or they eroticized the desire, because it was just easier to deal with if you eroticize it. It's one way to control it. And they experience it as this deeper kind of brokenness. And all of them, including the people who said, "You know, I think there might not be anything wrong with it," when they got honest with me, said that this was part of their past. So I think that there's something that they're trying to get out of this that was good and whole, and somehow became sexualized.

Also, another reason, and lesbians, I know less about that, I have not worked with as many lesbians, but again, what I know anecdotally, and I do confess it's just anecdotal, is that there's similar stuff in their background as well. Also, the stats aren't great. I mean, the culture wants to say, "well, the monogamous homosexual relationship is possible." Well, first of all, heterosexuals can't throw stones with a 52% divorce rate, so let's just get that clear. I'll just editorialize for a minute, maybe before we go out and want to save marriage we should save marriages in the church so that we're not getting divorces. I say that as a divorced person, as you know. The stats on the supposedly monogamous homosexual relationship are not good, particularly for men. It is very rare. Women do better on that, but even homosexual women have far less rate of monogamous relationships then heterosexual women. Granted, you might want to say, 'Well, that's because it's not accepted in our culture." There's probably some truth to that. But even as it gets more and more accepted, it doesn't seem to be changing that fact in the gay community.

So I believe that homosexual behavior from a reading of Scripture, from my knowledge of having walked through this with different people, falls short of God's intended best. And there's a part of this that I will just take on faith as well. The thing about God is he's bigger than I am, and I'm not going to understand everything he has to say. Again, that's the advantage of being a God. The God that I can control and understand and does everything that I understand is me. And if I'm worshipping that God, I don't want to, because I've made him up. There's part of me that wants to say, "P.S. God designed us, he knows how we work best. If he says this is not our best, then we need to trust him on that." Again, I can put orange juice in my car if I want. But the manufacturer tells me, that's not going to do it any good. So I think that there's a part of us that needs to listen to our manufacturer.

Okay, that's truth. How about grace?

By this point you're probably wondering, "Well, what is this homosexual person supposed to do? This is so unfair. This is so wrong. This is so narrow-minded. What is this person supposed to do?" I believe that God offers wholeness to every human being, including the homosexual person. This side of the grave, and fully, on the other side of the grave. We're doing a sermon series called Remade, Jesus says: "Behold, I make all things new." And I don't believe there are exceptions to that. I believe where God says "this is the ideal" he gives us power to begin to get there. And I think that for the homosexual person the Holy Spirit can make them whole in a couple of different ways. Again, I want to say, I don't want to say this glibly. I certainly am not going to say, "Just pray about it, and it will go away." I'm not going to say that, because I don't think that happens. Maybe that happens occasionally, really rarely, maybe 1% of the time. But it hasn't happened for

anyone I have known who has struggled with this. So I don't want to be glib, and I do again want to acknowledge that as I say this I'm aware that for the homosexual person this is a very painful, difficult cross to bear, and that those of us who are heterosexual need to be careful when we start pointing fingers and giving prescriptions. So I want to do this carefully, and with that apology that I issued in the beginning out in front of me.

Three ways that I've seen God bring wholeness to the homosexual person: one is to remove or diminish the homosexual desire, an option that is usually poohpoohed in the media as not possible, though there's an awful lot of data that indicates that it is. And that data gets suppressed in the media. Again, I'm not saying this is a matter of just praying about it and it will go away. I think the complete removal of homosexual desire, completely, is probably pretty rare, I don't know for sure, but I'm just guessing that that's pretty rare. Even rarer is the instant miraculous cure that I was talking about. Usually, as I've seen it played out, it's a combination of a lot of prayer, a lot of therapy, and then key is a great community. A great community of people around them, particularly for the men that I have worked with who have struggled with this issue, the key for their wholeness was a community of men who came around them and said, "We love you, we support you, we don't judge you, we're going to help you find God's wholeness as the Holy Spirit guides you." And those people became kind of a band of brothers, the community of men that in the case of the men that I've worked with felt like they never had. For many, many gay people, the brokenness was formed in community. It must therefore be healed in community. And one of the challenges I want to issue to us at FPCB is, can we be that kind of community? Outright removal of the desire is probably pretty rare, though I think it can happen: God can do anything. But I also think it can be diminished over time. I don't think that is always the case, but I think it is more often the case than the secular media would let us believe.

The second way that God can bring wholeness is a full abundant singleness. Again, in our culture this is just like the most unimaginable fate because we've accepted Freud, and "the greatest good in life is to have sex." I just question that. It's good, but you can live without it, and plenty of people have done so, lived full and productive lives. Singleness, celibacy, is not a synonym for a disaster of a life. There are all kinds of things in life that are good and whole, and there are all kinds of ways to experience life in that wholeness. Life can be very abundant that way. And that may be the way that God makes a homosexual person whole. Here's where we Christians need to step in. Because if that is the option for certain people that God is leading them toward, that's a very painful option, even in spite of what I just said. There are questions about, "Then who is my family?" Here's a place where the Christian community can step up. How about being the radical, Acts 2 community that I see in the New Testament, and saying things like, to a

homosexual person, "You are now part of our family permanently. You live in our house. You are here every Christmas. You are here every birthday." In many families that would be a good thing, in some families that would be scary. But you know, I mean, "You are part of our family. We love you. You are not going to be alone." Wow. That would be a statement, if Christians started to do that *en masse*. It may be a full productive whole singleness. Many people have lived single lives, very rich, and very productive. One of my favorite examples of this is Henri Nouwen. It's come out since that he quite probably was gay. Brilliant man, has changed my life. He lived a life of celibacy. He had a very rich, very abundant, very joy-filled life. Henri Nouwen. Henri Nouwen.

Remove or diminish the desire. Full abundant singleness.

Heterosexual marriage. This one really doesn't get talked about in either camp. Marry someone of the opposite sex. Homosexual is a term that was coined in the nineteenth century. Before that, there really wasn't a concept of homosexuality. I've read everything printed in Elizabethan English there is, and it just didn't exist, the concept. The desire existed, of course. The behavior existed, yes. The concept, the idea that this was your identity, the idea that this was your destiny, was unheard of, unthought of. This is post-Freud, that this would be your identity or your destiny. The attitude, always in human history, has been, "Oh, do you kind of fancy men, or fancy the same gender? Okay. But what does that have to do with getting married and having babies." In fact that's how a lot of men or women lived their lives back then and some of them cheated on the side and many of them didn't. I am not talking about a sham marriage. I'm not talking about a marriage you use to kind of conceal the truth: that's a lie. That's not whole. That's not what I'm talking about. The marriages I'm talking about, the men I've counseled, this is the option that all of them ended up in. Their homosexual desires continue in many ways, usually very diminished, but still continue. Their wife knows everything, all about it. And their friends know about it. This is not a pretend, sham marriage to cover something up. It's a marriage of intense intimacy, actually. For these men, as they describe it, because in a marriage like this the intimacy is usually better and deeper than in a regular old marriage, because you've had to be more honest, you've had to expose your deepest fears, your deepest wounds, usually what emerges out of that emotional connection is a pretty intense sexual passion. Which is probably more the way God wants sexuality to be anyway. So in many ways it approaches closer to what God would want, because they have been so deeply known and so deeply loved. Again, the homosexual desire may still be there, but as one of the men that I've counseled said to me, "So I like vanilla ice cream better than chocolate, but if vanilla isn't good for me, and chocolate is much better for me, I like chocolate pretty well, and it works for me." Those are his words, not mine. He may still be tempted, so is every heterosexual man, usually every day, at least if the men that I talk to in my counseling sessions are indicative. We are all tempted. But it doesn't mean we act on it. What these people have found, and what they will tell me, is that their life is fuller, richer, wholer, than the gay lifestyle that they left, because they are known more intimately, known more deeply, accepted at deeper levels, and have experienced God's wholeness. They've been remade. That's pretty powerful stuff. Again, it's still difficult, a heavy cross to bear. I don't want to say this glibly. But an option.

How should Christians respond? Let me just give you a couple of ideas. Grace and truth, certainly forgiveness, certainly acceptance, certainly love, but also hold out God's promise of wholeness. Not in a manipulative or demanding way, but say, "I believe that God could have this for you." Grace and truth, and not glib grace and truth. The gay people that I have counseled have said to me over and over, "Don't say, hate the sin, love the sinner." Don't say that. I know what we're getting at when we say that, but it's wounding. A much deeper grace and truth, and grace goes first. Even in the John Scripture, "Grace and truth." Lead with grace. Jesus is our savior, and then he is our Lord. He dies for us, and then he is our Lord. He serves first, grace first, grace first. In the Bible, God always speaks truth to power, and grace to the outcasts. Now truth comes along, but lead with grace.

Here's the most important thing. Jesus first and Jesus only. If you take nothing away, this take away, please. Jesus first. The main thing, the main thing, the main thing, and the main thing is Jesus. When I was a pastor on the Stanford campus I would get a version of this question all the time: "So, I suppose you want me to stop getting drunk on Saturday night if I become a Christian. So. I guess I can't sleep with my girlfriend anymore if I become a Christian." Or, with the gay people that I would counsel, "I guess the first thing you want me to do is leave my gay lifestyle." I would always say, "Can we talk about that later? Way later. Like, way later. I don't want to talk about that with you. The only question I have for you is: How's it between you and Jesus? How's it between you and Jesus? Because when Jesus gets in your life, he's going to change a whole lot of things. He's going to change how you spend your time; he's going to change how you spend your money; he's going to change how you talk about other people; and he's going to change you sexually. I don't know what order he's going to do that in. I have no idea. He may be more concerned about that gossip habit you have right now, and that may be the first Five Year Plan, I don't know. All I know is, I'm not your sanctifier, Jesus is. All I know is, I'm not your sanctifier, Jesus is."

My job was not to get someone to stop being a gay person. My job was to introduce him to Jesus, and let Jesus take it from there. Now along the way I could describe for them what I thought wholeness might look like in that area, as well as

describing what wholeness might look like in how they deal with their finances. But Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

One time I did this for a group of people and it was this sort of very fundamentalist church, and they brought in a bunch of complete non-Christians, and they had me give a talk similar to this. It was horrible. People were yelling at me. Literally, they would stand up and scream at me. Both sides. I told my friend, "You so owe me big. Next time I ask a favor, you give it to me." At the very end of this a high school kid stood up and he said, "I don't understand all of this. I really don't know. The only thing I know is I hope this doesn't get in the way of anyone knowing Jesus." I just wanted to say, "Amen." The Jesus of Scripture will always lead us to truth. The Jesus of Scripture will always lead us to truth.

The last thing is serve the gay community. How do we respond? I think we serve the gay community. In my opinion we have no right to say anything until we have served the gay community. I believe, and I hold myself accountable to this too. I believe we were handed a great opportunity 25 years ago to do this, and we missed it. That was when the AIDS epidemic came out. It was then considered a "gay disease." We know it's not, but it was then considered that. It was creating all kinds of fear in the gay community, and the Christian community was not there. There were some. Definitely there were some. But predominately what got said over the air waves was, "This is God's punishment." All that stuff. And I just think that if the church en masse, if Christians en masse, had said, "Oh this is horrible. How can we serve? How can we help? How can we care?" Remember what, you've heard me say this many times, first century Christians, what did they do when the plague came to Rome? They stayed in Rome, and they cared for the sick. If we had done that, (and I was an adult at the time, I was in college, I didn't do anything, so I hold myself accountable,) I think we'd be having a completely different conversation today, if en masse we'd done that. I think, Jesus comes as a servant, then he is our Lord, he tells us grace, and then he tells us truth. How can we serve the gay community? I occasionally get invitations to go speak at one of these rallies, you know, anti this or for that, around this issue, and I've always turned them down. I've been asked to speak at a rally in Olympia, and I always say, "No, that's not how I view my assignment in the Kingdom." But I was talking about a year ago to a well known, I guess you would call him an anti-gay activist in the community, not Ken Hutchison, another person, and he is in the battle, publicly, politically, and that is his assignment in the Kingdom. But he said to me in the conversation, "I think I need to be doing what I'm doing, but sometimes I think the most effective thing would be if I just sat down with a bunch of gay leaders in King County and listened to their pain." I said, "If you do that, I'll be right beside you." Someday I'll probably call him up and say, "How about we go do that?"

Can we serve first? What would that look like? I think it would look like being part of trying to deal with the AIDS epidemic. The church now is doing it. Christians have figured that out. That's the good news. We were slow, but we've figured it out. That's the good news. I think it's doing that. I think it's being those friends. I think it's being that community of people around people who struggle with this. Maybe it's inviting them into our families. Politically, this is where I get really confused. So at this point I just start to throw up my hands. What about in the political arena out there. We're kind of forced into it, you've got amendments and Marriage Acts, and what about in our own denomination, I mean I'll tell you where we stand and where I stand on that, we don't believe that ordination for a practicing homosexual is appropriate or scriptural. That is where this church officially stands. I agree with that theologically. I want to put all kinds of grace around that. Again, someone who feels this, no problem. But someone who acts on this, and does not want to turn away from it, we would not ordain them in this church. In the same way as if someone had committed adultery, if they said, "That is wrong and I'm not going to do it any more," we would ordain that person. But if someone committed adultery and said, "What's more, I'm going to keep doing it. And I think it's a good thing. I really like it. I just can't resist it." We would say, "No." So the standard in our denomination and in this church is fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman and chastity in singleness. It says nothing about orientation, it's all about behavior. That is the official position of this church and I agree with that.

In our denomination as you know there is a lot of discussion, controversy, and differing opinions on that, as there are in this church. In the last general assembly, which is kind of our Grand Pooh-Bah Organization, there was a decision made to allow local, regional bodies to waive the clause that requires fidelity and chastity, but then there were all kinds of other amendments tacked onto that, and we're in kind of a wait and see period. But where this church stands is fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman and chastity in singleness.

What about in the larger political realm out there? How do we talk about it politically? Christians have the right to advocate their positions in the public sphere. I think Christians ought to vote their conscience. However, for me, I see Jesus and the early church serving more than they are forming political action committees. There are many immoral things to protest, in Rome. Female infanticide was rampant, not to mention throwing people to the lions and crucifying them. There was a lot of stuff to object to in Rome, and I don't see the early Christians doing that. What I see the Christians doing is serving the Roman community and then living their own ethics within their community. When they did that, it was very attractive. One of the reasons Christianity grew so fast is, amongst themselves, they would not practice female infanticide. Female infanticide was rampant in the Roman world, but the Christians would not do it.

Women found that very attractive, because it was making a statement. Not only that, women could have leadership roles. Women were affirmed. As they lived out their own ethic, people were drawn to them.

I think that yes, there's probably a place for the public advocacy and all of that, but I just feel like we'd be better off if we served more and yelled less. That's my opinion.

And that's all I've got to say. So, we have about thirty minutes for you to talk back.

Questioner: Since there was no English word for homosexual until the nineteenth century, what was the Greek word used in the Scripture passage? There were two Greek words; one was for the passive partner, and one for the active partner. Both of those are used in the New Testament. The concept of homosexuality was known and understood in those days. Robert Gagnon is a professor that has the best book on this (*The Bible and Sexuality*, by Robert Gagnon) and explains it quite carefully.

Dr. Dudley: Let me clarify, when I say that the word didn't exist, or the concept didn't exist, I should more rightly say that the concept as we understand it didn't exist, that this is somehow your identity, this is somehow something that you would use the "to be" verb about. That's really more a 19th century development with psychiatry. It was always considered more a moral issue, more a behavioral issue, than an identity issue, but it was certainly practiced. We understand it is a sexual orientation, but that wouldn't have been how they thought about it through most of human history. But certainly the feelings existed, the actions existed, of course.

Questioner: It produces children, and I think that is one of the main things, the way God helps us to be whole, because we have to get outside of ourselves and take care of children. Now in your discussion of this whole subject, you don't mention the result of the heterosexual union. And I think that's very important. And believe me, now that I'm a grandfather and get to really have fun with children, grandchildren, the carrying on of the race or the group is God's intention, and that comes from the heterosexual union. And we have to care about our wives, and they about us, and work together to try to raise children that are whole and have a chance to be whole in God's eyes.

Dr. Dudley: Yeah, thank you. I actually had it in my notes and somehow I forgot to mention it. I skipped over it. But see how the Holy Spirit works? You got it in there. Children – makes you wonder what else is in the notes, doesn't it? Every Sunday I always leave something out. Yes, I think that's another important part of the heterosexual union, and why God created us male and female. That's another way of stepping out beyond ourselves. It also is a love that issues out, produces

something other than itself. It doesn't exist in and of itself, or for itself, it produces something, which is what God's love does: it creates all of creation. That said, as you probably know, there are a great many homosexual couples who would say, "We'd love to have children, if you would loosen up your laws and let us adopt easier so that we can do that." But I still agree with you, the aspect of procreation is very important.

Questioner: I have a teenage son who's gay, so this is a very deep issue for me, and the whole time I was sitting here listening to you I was thinking of a question to ask you, and you've nailed every question. This was a brilliant discussion. That's all I have to say. Thank you very much. Are you going to make this available on the church website?

Dr. Dudley: Yeah, it's been taped.

Questioner: Because my son is a voracious atheist, Sam Harris fan, and on and on. But he's open to, at least, he's a very bright guy, and he'd be open to looking at this. It was brilliant.

Dr. Dudley: Thanks, I appreciate you saying that. I think one of the things that breaks my heart around this issue is: a) your son, who I don't feel has probably seen the face of Christ in our culture from the church. Either, you get the, you all know the stereotype, the judgmental deal. But the other, hey, this is as best as God can do for you. I mean, I'm not ... Tolerance, it's a funny virtue. It's our cardinal virtue in this culture. But you think about it, I've said this in sermons before, if I said to my wife, "I just really tolerate you, I want you to know from the bottom of my heart how I tolerate you, specially right now." Tolerance is a synonym for "I don't care." And I think "love" is the cardinal virtue in Scripture. And what love says is, "I love you, I'm not leaving you, there is nothing you can do to make me not love you, there is nothing you can do to make me think less of you, this doesn't define you, you're more than that, and God has more than that, and I'm going to be here with you until you find it. It's not going to be easy, it's going to be hard, and I'm not going to give up." And what breaks my heart is I don't think your son has had a lot of opportunities to hear that, because in our sound-bite culture you just get one of the two extremes. It just drives me crazy, I can hardly watch the news anymore. I swear, when one of these things come up and they go find the Christian protestors, I swear they scan the crowd for the dumbest Christian there, they put the microphone in his face, they probably let him talk for thirty minutes saying stupid thing, and they tape the thirty seconds that was the stupidest thing he said, and that's what gets on the air waves. Right? It just drives me crazy. No subtlety. But other than that I don't have an opinion. Thank you. It's a complicated thing: how do we do grace and truth?

Questioner: I understand how a lot of people who act out homosexual behavior feel hurt by hard nosed Christians who see no sense of grace, but I think that there are people who will feel hurt no matter how well you present yourself to them if you confront their sin. So I don't think I can always measure how well I've done by whether they feel hurt or not.

Dr. Dudley: I agree. And I don't, in my, I'm a grace person. I always fall off the horse on the grace side. We all fall off one direction or the other, and I always go too far grace wise. I agree with you it's got to be both grace and truth, and I agree that when you confront someone with their sin, often they will not feel very good about you. Try preaching the stewardship sermon, and talking about money. You guys are great, that wasn't meant for you, you are a great church. But in other churches I've been in. And any kind of sin, you're right. And I don't think we should pull our punches. But what I'm advocating is that we understand that grace without truth is not grace, because the Gospel's bad news before it is good news. And if you're not also saying, "God has more for you. This is not God's best, you are falling short," I think, it's not grace, because you're not calling them to grow. And truth without grace is not truth, because you are leaving out the hope of grace.

Questioner: Yeah. I just want to make sure that people don't feel bad about themselves because they get this very negative thing back. Jesus was this great lover of people, and they ended up crucifying him. Obviously they were a bit pissed off at him.

Dr. Dudley: Yeah, and I've made plenty of people angry, despite of the way I'm a grace person, because I will not say to them, "Man, homosexuality is exactly the way God wants it, and wants you." I will not say that. I'll say, "I think God has more. Harder. But harder is often more fun."

Questioner: Most of the time we feel that homosexuality is a lifestyle choice. But one thing that seems kind of unfair to me, anyway, is that maybe a third of the cases they are programmed genetically to be, have homosexual feelings that persist from very early age throughout their life. It seems like it's a hoax or it's an unfair thing that's been programmed into these people. It's always been very disturbing to me.

Dr. Dudley: I'm not a scientist, so I can't solve the genetic vs nurture debate, but I think it is unfair, Clark. I think sin is unfair. I think children who are born with malformed hearts and people who get cancer when they are twenty, I think it all is unfair. And if it makes me mad at anyone, it makes me mad at the devil, I mean, he's just a jerk. You know, when we separated ourselves from God spiritually, (bodies and souls are connected,) our bodies no longer work the way God wants them to, so genes go haywire and all kinds of stuff happens. That breaks God's heart. And as we all know sometimes he does miraculous cures and sometimes

he leaves the thorn in our flesh for whatever, but gives us grace in that, and we grow through that. I think it's a terrible burden for people to bear. Again, I think for a heterosexual to just say, glibly, "Just pray about it," that just isn't the reality, for many people. I also want to say that for some people that can be the reality, and some people have found healing, and some people have found wholeness, and there are ministries that help people do that. We've got some handouts in the back that you can pick up, Exodus International and Metanoia Ministries are two that I can think of. So I think that it's a very difficult burden for them to bear. How we help them understand what God is doing in their life is very important.

Questioner: If a gene were to be detected that could be removed, would the church favor the removal of that gene.

Dr. Dudley: That's another forum (laughter). Let's put it this way, I think if there was a cure, of course we would. Tony Campolo a long time ago did a study with, I can't remember what the sample size was, I think it was fairly small, so it was probably not a great scientific study, but he interviewed a whole host of homosexual men, all of them non-Christian, all of them self-affirming, "this is the right way, this is a good thing, celebrate it, I'm gay and I'm proud" kind of people. He asked them 70 or 80 questions. One of them right in the middle was, "If there was a pill that came out tomorrow that would take this away, would you take it?" Almost every one of them said, "I would." So the idea that somehow people are just kind of, it's to your point, Clark, we need to realize the pain that's around this. I still want to say, I don't see this in the media, I certainly see it in the church, transformed lives, that are living in wholeness either through having the feelings taken away or diminished, or entering into a marriage that works, or saying, "You know what? Singleness has a lot of opportunities that being married doesn't."

Questioner: Do you think God makes mistakes?

Dr. Dudley: I do not think God makes mistakes. But I think in a fallen world, all kinds of things happen that God didn't want or intend, and that at some point God is going to put a stop to all of this. That's the doctrine of heaven, that there is wholeness on the other side. So no, I don't think God causes homosexuality, I don't think he created it, anymore than he created cancer. But again, body and soul – this is something we don't understand, because we're too Greek. We think the body is the prison house of the soul. That is not what Scripture says: it says body and soul are together, and what you do with one affects the other. What we do in our souls affects our bodies. If I worry too much I'm going to get an ulcer. So when we separated our souls from God, our bodies were no longer perfect, and now bad stuff happens: cancer, all kinds of stuff. And God's going to put an end to it. God in this lifetime is going to work through it to provide wholeness one way or the other, and God will put an end to it. Correct: you can still get cancer and not be apart from God, because we all have inherited this broken body, in one way or

another. We all die. In the same way, you can be devoutly dedicated to God and experience homosexual feelings, or cancer, or anything else. Hear me right, I'm not say, if you sin, God is zapping you. I'm saying, in a broken world we all suffer the effects of sin.

Questioner: I have this question. I have neighbors that are lesbians. They have been partners together for a long time. They have a young daughter together, somehow. My question is this: I'd love to invite them to this church, because I know that they want to be involved in a Christian church, but I don't know where you would strike that balance between truth and grace, because if they came here, and they looked at a Sunday morning bulletin, they'd see on the back, "Gay and Lesbian Support Group," and though I would want to serve them, and show them grace, and invite them into our church, I feel that it might also be a slap in the face, that I'd be trying to tell them, "God wants more for your life, so therefore I should break up your relationship." How would I go about striking that balance?

Dr. Dudley: That's where the rubber meets the road, that question you asked, and that's what I've had to deal with. As a pastor in the Bay Area, you can only imagine how many times I've had to deal with this. Our across the street neighbors are two men living together, and they've never said it, but they've implied heavily that they are gay. Let me answer that two ways. That's why that thing I said, "If you take nothing away, take this away: Jesus first, Jesus only." My job in life as a Christian is not to fix anyone's anything, my life is to lead them to their fixer. And so I just refuse to get in a conversation pre-Jesus, it's the cart before the horse. "The Bible says ... " "Well Bible, Schmible." If you don't know Jesus, it doesn't matter. So you have to get the horse, then the cart. So I always lead with Jesus, and I always say, "You know, I do think God has more for you. But I'm not judging you. I'm not saying you've got to stop this now, I'm just saying I want you to know Jesus, and he's going to deal with a lot of stuff in your life. I think he'll get around to this, but it may be twenty years, I don't know. He may worry way more about your overspending habit. I just know that he wants wholeness for you in this, and in everything else." I lead with Jesus. Now, once they know Jesus, I think the conversation can begin to switch. Then you can start. "Here's what your savior says, here's what your savior wants." Then you can bring in much more of the truth. I'm not saying no truth at all. But once they know Jesus it can become a different conversation. But man, when they don't know Jesus ... that's what I'm after.

As to bringing them to this church: I certainly would hope that we were the kind of community where anybody's anything could be exposed, and where we would manage to be people of the third way: I believe God has more, I believe this isn't God's intended best for you, but I'm not judging you. I've got my stuff, you've got your stuff. And that's for anybody's anything: pornography; messed up

marriages; adultery. Can we be the kind of community that neither celebrates sin, nor gets overly judgmental, but simply points to the cross, points to the wholeness God offers, and says, "We're on this journey toward it together." I hope we can get there. It is very hard in a church this size. I think we do a pretty good job, actually. I think you could legitimately say there are people who do not agree with me, and what I'm saying, and we love them too, and you can disagree. Come and find Jesus. This is part of why I don't do it from the pulpit: a) it needs a lot more time to get it right; and b) you can't, the audience is too broad, they can't hear it, it's not subtle enough in a sermon.

Questioner: Why do you think Jesus didn't say a word about this issue?

Dr. Dudley: I think because in his culture the obvious did not need to be stated. Jesus didn't say a word about a lot of things, either. Jesus didn't say anything about genocide, either. You can't really make an argument that because he didn't say anything about it, therefore he must have approved. It was so clearly a sin in his culture, he really didn't need to call it out. It would have been stating the obvious. That's my read on it. Debbie has something she wants to say.

Debbie: Jesus wasn't at all shy about saying anything when he disagreed with the prevailing culture, and the prevailing culture at that time took homosexual behavior to be a sin, and if Jesus had disagreed with that he would have spoken out about it. He did speak out about things when he disagreed with Pharisees. And if he didn't say anything about it that strongly implies that he did not disagree with it.

Dr. Dudley: In the Jewish culture ... Now Roman culture was a different deal. It was pretty widespread in Roman culture. But in Jewish culture it was clearly thought of as a sin, falling short of God's intended best. And as Debbie points out, Jesus was willing to overturn convention in all kinds of ways: he turned gender relations upside down. The way Jesus brought equality to women was unheard of in his culture. He was perfectly willing to do that. So I agree with Debbie.

Questioner: Yes, Scott, I just think this is awesome, what we're doing tonight. One thing that occurs to me though, as a church, and as a group of believers here, and that is the word "judgment." You've said many times not to judge. To me it is so confusing in relating to sin. We are to judge right and wrong, we are not to judge the motives of a man's heart. And that's where I find comments coming to the Christian, "Who are you to judge?" In my mind I'm saying, but we are to judge right and wrong behavior, according to God's word. So how do you speak on that? How do we relate that statement to the homosexual?

Dr. Dudley: I think so much has to do with, I use the word "judgment" because I think that's a shorthand word, but I agree with you we are called to distinguish between right and wrong behavior. Part of it is in that word "behavior." It is

behavior, not people. But so much is in the tone, so much is in the way you do it. So much is in ... That's why I talk about God's intended best. Not because I don't believe in sin. I believe in sin. I don't have a problem saying, "This is a sin homosexuality is a sin." But how I communicate that to someone so that they can hear the truth that I am trying to get across is important. I have found in my discussions with gay people, when I say to them, "I'm not judging you as a person. I've got my stuff." First of all, that's the best place to go. "I've got my stuff, you've got your stuff, we've all got stuff." Just to level the playing field. When I say, "I believe that God has more, what you experience right now may be even good, you may be in a good relationship. I believe God has better, and more, and I believe that it's not perhaps as good as you think it is, but you know what? I'm not going to force it on you right now, because ultimately the person who can make that so in your life is Jesus. So can we just start to know Jesus?" I think there's a way to do it gracefully and gently without pulling punches. I don't think any gay person that I've counseled with has ever accused me of pulling punches. I don't think they've ever left thinking that I've approved, or thought it was God's will. And yet I don't think any of them, well no, some of them have felt judged. What the gentleman David said up here earlier, inevitably, no matter how careful we are, some people are not going to like what we say. And our reference point is God, not what they think.

Questioner: That last question that was asked was, why do so many different churches interpret the Bible differently on this point?

Dr. Dudley: I used to get asked a similar question when I taught literature in the University. Students would say to me, "How can you grade my paper? Isn't that just subjective? Isn't it your opinion versus my opinion? Isn't it all up for interpretation?" And what I would tell students is there are many ways that you can read the text of Hamlet, and there are many arguments you can make about what Hamlet means, and you can support those with the evidence from the text, and there are many arguments you can make that are not supported by the text of Hamlet. For instance, you can argue about whether or not Hamlet's tragic flaw was laziness, or fear, or pride, or whatever. You can argue about whether or not Hamlet was in love with his mother, and you can give arguments for and against, and it comes down to how well you support your point. But you could never, for instance, argue that Hamlet is really a play about the Queen of Sweden, because whenever Hamlet is mentioned he is described as the Prince of Denmark. Whenever he is mentioned. So you couldn't say that he's the Queen of Sweden, the text wouldn't support that. I think it's the same with homosexuality and the Bible. Every single time it is mentioned, homosexual behavior is mentioned in Scripture, it is mentioned as a sin. There is no exception to that. If there was just one exception. I think we would have a debate. But there is not one exception. So I would say that to interpret homosexual behavior as anything other than sin is not supported by the text of the Bible. You may want to make other arguments that are outside the Bible, but as far as what the Bible says, there's no way that you can claim that the Bible says anything other than that homosexuality is a sin, because every time it's mentioned that's how it's mentioned. So I guess I would be saying I would disagree with their reading of Scripture, and argue that their interpretation is not supportable by the text of Scripture.

I just want to close our evening by telling you a story about a man I know from California, who's part of our church down in California. He was immersed in the gay lifestyle for a number of years, but always felt a kind of brokenness around that inside of him. Eventually he became a Christian. He didn't like church people at all, but he figured he liked Jesus, so he'd give him a try. At first, for a long time, he hid his struggles with homosexuality from his friends, and from the people who knew him, but eventually he opened up and told a few close friends, all of them men, what he was struggling with. And they responded with both grace and truth. They said to him over and over again, "We love you, there's nothing you can do that will change our love for you, we're not going to judge you, we're certainly not going to just tell you to pray about it and it will go away, or pray harder and it will go away. But we're also not going to say that this is the best that God can do for you, that there's no better life available. We are going to continue to believe for you that wholeness is possible. We're going to pray for you. We're going to be your friend. If you ask us to, we're going to hold you accountable to changing behaviors that you yourself say that you want to change. We're also not going to ask you about it every day. We're not going to come up and say, "Gosh, has God zapped you yet? Are you fixed?" We believe that this doesn't define you. We believe there's a lot more to you than this. You're intelligent, you've got a good sense of humor. There's a whole lot of stuff going on in you and we're not going to just let this define you. But we are going to seek God's wholeness for you." And that's what they did. They were great friends. They included him in everything they did. If they went to a movie they took him along. If they went to a baseball game they took him along. As time went on they shared some of their secrets, some of their sexual struggles with him. Things like pornography and lust, and marriages that were on the rocks, and various things. They really became that band of brothers, that community of men that this man had always longed for, and had never had. Along the way he got some good Christian counseling, as well, and eventually he was able to uncover some deep wounds that were inside of him. He was able to tell his friends about these deep wounds, many of them coming from his peers, that left him longing to be part of a community of men, and feeling outside of that. And to control that he had eroticized those feelings. He was able to open some of that stuff up, and tell his friends about those deep wounds, and as they came to light they lost their power as secrets always do once they are exposed. Over time his attraction, same sex attraction, diminished. It never completely went away, but it diminished. Along the way he met a woman and fell in love with her. Told her all about himself and about his struggles, and she accepted him in that. For the first time in his life he felt fully known and fully loved, and for him that was a very erotic emotion. He married this woman. They have a couple of great kids, and he would say that he still struggles with same sex feelings, but he would also tell you that the life that he is living now is way more fulfilling than ever before. He's married, he has kids, he has these incredibly deep friendships that most of us long for and never get to. His struggles with homosexual behavior turned into something that got him to these friendships that most of us could never imagine, in terms of their depth. He's seen the power of God work in some amazing ways. I believe that God can bring wholeness to all of us, regardless of what we face, but even to the person who is struggling with same sex desires, God can bring wholeness. It may not look like this man's story, it may look like a full, rich life being single. But God can make all of us whole, regardless of what our brokenness is.

So my question to all of us, First Pres Bellevue, and my challenge to us, is can we be that kind of community to each other? Not just on this issue, but on every issue. Can we be the kind of community where whatever folks are struggling with, they can be open about it, and find God's healing. Not get judged or condemned, but also not be told, "Oh, this is no problem. It's okay. This isn't brokenness," when it is brokenness. Can we be the kind of community that offers both grace and truth? Accepting and loving, while at the same time holding out God's promise of wholeness to everyone, no matter what our brokenness is. Can we be that kind of community? Can we be people of the third way?

And I believe we can. I see, I think we're a long way in that direction, and I think that with God's help we can become more and more of that community, and we will be able to see the power of God.

<u>Prayer:</u> Lord Jesus, thank you for your ability to make us whole, and we pray for us as a community here in this church that you would help us to be people of the third way. Help us to be people who offer both grace and truth, both acceptance as well as holding out the promise of your wholeness to each other, in a way that is loving and life giving. We know that we can't do this without you, so we ask for your help. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

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Why UPC should join the Fellowship of Presbyterians

- The Fellowship is an association of churches within and outside the PC(USA) formed to foster flourishing churches by sharing ideas, ministry resources and strategy to fulfill Jesus' mission of making disciples.
- We wish to stay in relationship with Presbyterian churches with which UPC has long worked in ministry and some of which have chosen to leave the PC(USA). The Fellowship provides a formal vehicle for doing that for UPC staff and members alike.
- · We wish to deepen such relationships by being held accountable to other churches in ways not presently offered within our denomination as we seek to fulfill our common mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ while maintaining a Reformed and Evangelical heritage.
- We firmly endorse the Fellowship Covenant and Essential Tenets which are wholly in line with UPC's understanding of theology, scripture and our historic Confessions. The Covenant and Tenets emphasize the nature and role of Jesus as God's gracious human incarnation and the only source of our salvation; life in obedience to the Word of God as the final authority in all our decisions, choices, and actions; the fruit of the Holy Spirit in transforming our individual members and congregation for joyful and useful Kingdom work; and our covenant life together as brothers and sisters in faith called to live in community as faithful stewards of all of life, at peace with God and as winsome encouragers to all persons we encounter.
- We seek to emphasize UPC's primary mission of sharing hope in Jesus Christ as good neighbors in the community in which we minister, while avoiding the distraction of unfruitful church bureaucratic disputes and intractable theological debate.
- We embrace the Fellowship's emphasis on development of new congregations and of strong ministry paths and opportunities for the clergy candidates whom God is calling from our midst.

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Why a "Fellowship" of Presbyterians?

A Response from within the PC(USA)

The Fellowship of Presbyterians was created in 2011 to help individuals and congregations who are committed to building flourishing congregations who make disciples of Jesus Christ. In early 2012, ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians was formed. While some who have joined The Fellowship anticipate an eventual transition into ECO, the majority of Fellowship members are committed to ministry within the PC(USA) for the long haul. So why a "Fellowship" of Presbyterians within the PC(USA)? Here are some of the reasons.

We Are Presbyterian Christians

Presbyterians are, first and foremost, disciples of Jesus Christ. The term "presbyterian" merely distinguishes a part of the Body of Christ governed by elders (presbyters). Presbyterians and our elder-focused church structure have been particularly influential in the United States since before the founding of our nation. We have been leaders in government, commerce, science, and the arts; instrumental in founding hospitals, schools, and colleges; and champions of social justice built on biblical principles. Presbyterians have trained and sent missionaries to teach and model the Good News of Jesus Christ around the world. We are part of this amazing legacy.

We Are Part of the PC(USA)

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is one expression among many of this legacy. Assuming its present form through reunion in 1983, the PC(USA) was conceived in a theological tradition that begins and ends with Scripture, a confessional heritage that reflects 1,800 years of biblical interpretation, and a structure that, if rightly applied, is uniquely equipped for ministry in the 21st Century. However, the PC(USA) is also an institution governed by fallible human beings. People voting at any presbytery or General Assembly can make choices that would potentially move the institution away from our biblical and confessional heritage. When this happens, others in the PC(USA) must be intentional about reaffirming our biblical grounding, our confessional heritage, and our commitment to teaching and modeling the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The PC(USA) is Currently Being Misdirected

Denominations, like congregations, are merely institutions. A "congregation" or a "denomination" on its own cannot make a decision, chart a course, or even be renewed: the people who comprise the congregation or denomination can. This is an important distinction that is often overlooked. As members of The Fellowship, we take personal responsibility for the reality that our congregations have been among those who have fallen short in their calling to make disciples of Jesus Christ. We ourselves are partly responsible for the current trajectory of the PC(USA) away from its theological, confessional, and missional heritage. "The Denomination" has not erred and strayed—we all, who together are the PC(USA), have.

The PC(USA) is in Deepening Trouble

Our part of the Presbyterian family has been in steady decline for 45 years. Most PC(USA) congregations see far more funerals than baptisms, and baptisms of infants are less than half what they were when the PC(USA) was formed (1983)—reflecting a dramatic loss of young adults. Our "Wee Kirks" (less than 100 members) now account for over 51% of our denomination, and only 1,500 of those 5,439 small congregations have an installed pastor. Their future viability as congregations is in doubt. Even larger congregations that grew well for decades are now in a season of plateau or decline. While we did well in attracting the "Builder" generation (born prior to 1946), we have struggled to reach each succeeding generation.

The recent change in ordination standards and the impending change in the definition of marriage are flashpoints of controversy. However, these mask larger, more important, and more nuanced issues we face in the PC(USA); differing understanding of Scripture, authority, Christology (both the person and the work of Christ), the extent of salvation (universalism), and a broader set of moral issues. There is no longer a common understanding of our theological, confessional, or missional heritage, and the chronic infighting that results distracts us from our focus on making disciples of Jesus Christ. Acknowledging this reality is not enough. Immediate change is needed—and that change begins with each of us. That is why The Fellowship of Presbyterians (TFP) has been formed within the PC(USA).

What is The Fellowship of Presbyterians?

The Fellowship of Presbyterians (TFP) is unique within the Protestant Church. It is a covenanted order of individuals and congregations who share one common goal: to build flourishing congregations who make disciples of Jesus Christ. This is not an organization with which you can be casually affiliated. The Fellowship is built around a strong theological center, a commitment that the Church exists first and foremost to proclaim Jesus Christ in words and actions beyond its walls, and a deep desire to share a life of discipline and prayer in covenant with other like-minded disciples within and beyond the PC(USA). Part of this unique way of life is the mentoring we can offer one another in the gospel, the establishment of new worshiping communities, and the priority we place on nurturing the next generations of church leaders—deacons, elders, and pastors.

Why Remain within the PC(USA)?

We are committed to ministry within the PC(USA) because God calls us here. When asked why he would associate with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus answered, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick... I have not come to call the righteous but sinners." (Matthew 9:12, Luke 5:31) In interpersonal relationships, in declining neighborhoods, and in misdirected denominations, human instinct is to walk away--to not become involved. We who are part of TFP believe the gospel compels us to move toward the difficulty, not away. In the past 40 years, the PCA, the EPC, and ECO have followed Christ to faithful mission and witness beyond the PC(USA). We affirm that call. We are commissioned by the same Lord to remain within the PC(USA)—not as those who agree with the current trajectory of our denomination, but as missionaries called to teach and model the Good News of Jesus Christ within a structure that is in deepening trouble.

God's call to remain in the PC(USA) can take many forms. For some, it involves their history, place, or position within the denomination. Others feel missionary zeal for reaching the people they know best with the gospel during a season of theological confusion, cultural captivity, and gospel amnesia. For still others, The Fellowship provides a covenanted community in which they can discern their future direction and affiliation. No matter why people remain in the PC(USA) or wherever else they eventually sense God calling them, there is one inevitable reality—deep change.

How We Relate to Others

The challenges we now face as evangelicals within the PC(USA) may be unique in our experience, but few, if any, are unique to us alone. A crucial role of The Fellowship of Presbyterians is to redefine relationships at several levels. First the covenanted order of The Fellowship forms closer relationships and more significant accountability among its members, recapturing the essence of what presbyteries were originally meant to be. At another level, The Fellowship can nurture meaningful connections across denominational partitions, working without the obstruction of competing theological claims to participate in God's mission. In this world, ECO is our closest neighbor—sharing a common understanding of theological essentials. Others in the Reformed and Presbyterian family, the broader evangelical community, and the global Church are also our mentors and colleagues-exploring new approaches to 21st century ministry, finding new ways of identifying and nurturing the gifts of young leaders, and helping congregations turn their focus from stewardship of what is to a renewed vision for what God is calling us to be Finally The Fellowship has a crucial role within the PC(USA)—offering an orthodox and evangelical witness in the midst of a rapidly changing denomination.

Deep Change is inevitable

You cannot be part of The Fellowship and expect to continue with life and ministry as usual. Many Teaching Elders currently attempt to teach how to be faithful to the Truth without doing the required work of laying foundations of the Truth in the hearts and minds of their congregations. Many Ruling Elders are currently better equipped to be managers of congregational life than to teach the Faith. Although these realities are manifest somewhat differently among those who identify themselves as "progressive" or "evangelical," neglect of the substance of the Faith is widespread. As a result, everything else suffers—the strength of disciples, the health of congregations, the effectiveness of presbyteries, the faithfulness of decisions.

The way things used to be is the way things got to be the way things are. The Fellowship is built around reclaiming our theological and confessional heritage, and rediscovering God's call to mission. We have one purpose—to build flourishing congregations who make disciples of Jesus Christ. For most of us, being part of TEP will require deep change—rethinking our personal commitment to spiritual practices, reorienting our ministry focus, and reorganizing our priorities. This will not be easy, nor will it happen quickly, but disciplined attention to God's Word offers gifts the Church cannot receive by any other means.

Theology, Mission, and a Covenanted Order

If we desire to be an effective witness to the gospel we must know the gospel. We must not only live a life like that of the apostles, we must teach what the apostles taught. As missionaries within the PC(USA), we who are part of The Fellowship are also committed to sustained conversations whenever and wherever possible—clarifying the Reformed theological lens through which we read Scripture, listening with thankful hearts to the voice of the Church around the world and through the ages, and applying the wisdom we gain.

We cannot do this alone. This is why we require all who join The Fellowship to actively participate in theological friendships. Mission Affinity Groups for congregations and covenant Partnerships for pastors. In these groups we will study and learn together, providing mutual encouragement and accountability for the health of mission and ministry throughout TFP while also sustaining and advancing the theological, confessional, and missional work of the Church.

Mission

Building flourishing congregations who make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Core Values

Jesus-shaped Identity We believe Jesus Christ must be at the center of our lives and making disciples of Jesus at the core of our ministry.

Biblical Integrity We believe the Bible is the unique and authoritative Word of God, which teaches all that is necessary for faith and life. The prominence of God's Word over our lives shapes our priorities, and the unrivaled authority of the Bible directs our actions to be in concert with Christ's very best for our lives.

Thoughtful Theology We believe in theological education, constant learning, and the life of the mind, and celebrate this as one of the treasures of our Reformed heritage.

Accountable Community We believe guidance is a corporate spiritual experience. We want to connect leaders to one another in healthy relationships of accountability, synergy, and care.

Egalitarian Ministry We believe in unleashing the ministry gifts of women, men, and every ethnic group.

Missional Centrality We believe in living out the whole of the Great Commission – including evangelism, spiritual formation, compassion, and redemptive justice – in our communities and around the world.

Center-focused Spirituality We believe in calling people to the core of what it means to be followers of Jesus – what "mere Christianity" is and does – and not fixate on the boundaries.

Leadership Velocity We believe identifying and developing gospel-centered leaders is critical for the church, and a great leadership culture is risk-taking, innovative, and organic.

Kingdom Vitality We believe congregations should vigorously reproduce new missional communities to expand the Kingdom of God.

Commitments

The Theology Project affirms our confessional standards, clarifies the elements of our theological and confessional heritage that are essential to the faith, and outlines possibilities for ongoing theological conversations. Those who join The Fellowship affirm the Essential Tenets contained within the Theology Project.

The Fellowship Covenant identifies the great promises of God contained in Scripture, and offers an aspirational approach to ongoing growth in a life of faithful obedience. Those who join The Fellowship sign the Covenant, either as individuals or as a session on behalf of their congregation. Signing the Covenant does not imply that you or your congregation are already living in full accord with the commitments outlined, but that all who sign desire to grow in our relationship to God and to one another in these areas.

Narrative on the Health of Mission and Ministry establishes the expectations for each Session's participation in a Mission Affinity Group. All congregations who join The Fellowship will be asked these questions.

"Baptize More than We Bury by 2018" is a goal TFP congregations are committing to. It expresses our desire to reach people not yet baptized, and recapture times in Presbyterian history when we baptized twice as many adults as infants! As we make this commitment, we pray that God's Holy Spirit will carry us to a new way of being the people of God—deeply invested in seeing lives transformed. The Fellowship will focus on intentional discipleship of adults, nurturing families to be the primary teachers of the faith, and

equipping disciples of all ages to proclaim their faith in actions, attitudes, and relationships as well as words. This will require rethinking outreach, evangelism, and catechesis and, for many, the refocusing of congregational priorities in these important areas.

Establishing New Worshiping Communities is a central element to participation in The Fellowship. TFP members are being challenged to launch 250 of the 1001 new worshiping communities in support of the PC(USA)'s initiative.

Resources

- Elder Leadership Institute (ELI) develops and supports spiritual leadership through the training of Ruling and Teaching Elders.
- RightNow Resources offer hundreds of videos and teaching tools, soon to include those created by The Fellowship, for people who want to trade in their pursuit of the American Dream for ministry to a world that desperately needs Jesus Christ.
- Regional "Wee Kirk" Conferences resource and connect leaders of smaller membership congregations in nine regions across the United States.
- National and Regional Gatherings offer preaching, teaching, worship, fellowship, inspiration, and networking with like-minded disciples of Jesus Christ.
- Monthly E-News provides updates, ideas, resources, and areas of focus for individuals and congregations.

Relationships

As members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we who are part of The Fellowship of Presbyterians submit to the Constitution of the PC(USA) including the Book of Order and Book of Confessions, insofar as submission does not undermine or compromise our principal loyalty to Jesus Christ and to God's Will for humanity as it is revealed In Scripture.

We fully understand and accept there will be times when remaining faithful to our theological and confessional heritage, and to the voice of the Church around the world, will cause us to stand in direct opposition to current policies of the PC(USA). As a covenanted order, we will stand together, and will attempt at all times to speak God's Truth as we know it with humility and grace.

We also recognize and affirm the creation of ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians as a sister denomination within the Reformed Tradition and the Church of Jesus Christ, and we stand in full communion and cooperative ministry with our brothers and sisters in ECO. While individuals and congregations who are part of TFP may at some point investigate membership in ECO, the purpose of The Fellowship is not to serve as an ECO waiting room. Our purpose is to build flourishing congregations within the PC(USA).

Filed Under: News June 10, 2013 by The Fellowship

To Affiliate Or Not To Affiliate, That Is The Question

The primary question is to affiliate with the <u>Fellowship of Presbyterians</u> or not affiliate and continue as we are now. As we seek God's guidance, we should consider what seems best for BelPres, for the PC(USA), and for orthodox/evangelical congregations. Part of that last point could be what is best for the Fellowship, if it is likely to be the focus of activity for those congregations in the next few years. Finally we should consider how and whether our congregation exerts leadership and influence on others as we move through this process.

<u>First</u>, what are the pros and cons for BelPres—that is, as we look within our own congregation, why would we make either choice and what impact would there be on congregants, elders, pastors, staff?

Some Impacts of Affiliating:

- Affirmation of FoP theology and covenant will provide clarity on essentials and potentially surface division/differences, while reinforcing the missional message of Jubilee.
- Higher expectation for accountable relationships
- Higher expectation for mentoring and ministry leadership development
- Annual FoP evaluation (including narrative) in addition to PCUSA report
- FoP Annual Fee: \$250 per congregation
- [No Impact] Higher expectation for missional work which we already do
- Expectations regarding Church planting

Pros

- Provides clear statement of positive intent for people concerned about church's direction—avoids appearance of acquiescence
- Strengthens relationships with likeminded others for resources, ideas, encouragement
- Provides a model of and encouragement for accountability and spiritual growth by church leaders
- Encourages specific annual measures of effectiveness
- Reinforces/embeds our missional approach

Cons

- Will generate division at BelPres
- Will inspire additional questions & concerns from others in congregation, drawing attention to PCUSA problems
- BelPres leaders may not want that level of accountability, discipline or direction (e.g. mentoring, annual report, church planting, etc.)
- Added meetings and reports
- Difficult to agree on what should be considered essential and non-essential

BelPres Document for their Session in its discernment process

<u>Second</u>, what are the pros and cons as it relates beyond our congregation—how do our actions impact our presbytery, the Seattle Committee of Correspondence, UPC, small evangelical congregations, and the denomination at large?

Some Impacts of Affiliating:

- Coordinating affiliation with other churches sends stronger message of unity
- Requires participation in both systems (2 annual reports, multiple "Presbytery" mtgs, etc.)
- Helps contribute to the viability of the FoP
- [No impact] BelPres can partner with any group regardless of affiliation
- [No Impact] BelPres can lead within PCUSA with or without affiliating

Pros

- Stronger relationships with FoP congregations
- PR issues easier in a group
- Helping to make staying in PCUSA more attractive for others
- Provides encouragement/support to other congregations—helps small evangelical congregations find support (not just here but nationally)
- Helps ensure that there is a pathway for congregations if conditions deteriorate in the denomination
- Encourages reform in Louisville

Cons

- Less contact with non-FoP congregations
- Two systems require additional time
- Appearance of schism
- Could appear as though congregation has "given up" on PCUSA

1-3 sentences describing position

anxiety. Nobody is currently telling us what we do. Let's keep it that way. must do nor is anyone telling us what we cannot in Jesus Christ - rather than away from them with this point in time. We should be moving toward don't believe there is a problem to be solved at

Benefits of position

tellowship I see little or no true benefit to joining the

How can UPC achieve mission within We can still achieve our mission with diligent will be moving away from our center. make it more difficult and will be distracting. We effort and focus, but joining the fellowship will

this position?

Stay - In PCUSA Allifiate - PCUSA + Fellowship

a decision which has the potential for distrust and and ministry AND do an inventory check on our the center of our faith and mission - sharing hope UPC with a great opportunity to further engage UPC should join the Fellowship, while at this time "corner of the tent" to congregate with similar remaining in the PCUSA. Joining will provide drift within the PCUSA and would rather focus on theology. Additionally, it will in a sense give us a the core ministry of sharing hope and making churches like Menlo Park and 1st Pres Bellevue, who are growing weary of fighting the theological

affiliate with that are concerned about the direction of the PCUSA. strong message to UPC members and those we or another denomination. This will also send a minimal disruption compared to leaving for ECO and affiliating with the Fellowship will cause affiliating with similar churches who want to focus on fulfilling Jesus' mission of sharing hope and Allows UPC to stay in a formal relationship with making disciples. Staying in the denomination the denomination while at the same time

accountability leaders, in the form of fellowship and churches. It will be spiritual life giving to our connect and partner with leaders in other the Fellowship will provide new opportunities to The Fellowship is who we already are - joining

Go - Fellowship + ECO/Other

our own congregation in dialog about our mission to its historical creeds & Biblical underpinnings in process of researching long term affiliations that In order for UPC to maintain credibility in the & community life, immediately join the Fellowship as a proclamation global Christian community it needs to will nurture & encourage thriving congregational the Reformed tradition. This is a first step in the

speaking into our cultural settings with wisdom witness through accountability and creativity in Biblical documents, will strengthen our corporate and his salvific work for us as proclaimed by the beliefs and will promote understanding as a & other groups, who share deep faith in Jesus community of faith. Affiliation with the Fellowship congregation in knowing and articulating our core This process of addressing the theological drift of PCUSA will provide great clarity for our

in the process of transitioning to ECO, and over from the PCUSA. There are another 48 churches member churches, all of which were dismissed ECO in January of 2012. " ECO now has 28 Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians, or creation of a "new reformed body" known as the dissolved... in 2012. This is an increase from the dismissal...and eighty-six churches were ECO. A movement has launched. 75 more are discerning a possible dismissal to 75 dissolved in 2011." It also explains the churches that were dismissed from PCUSA last Increased in 2012." It reports, "The number of 2011...110 congregations were granted year has increased by fivefold compared to Churches Leaving Denomination Dramatically local/global communities at this time and place God is calling us to and equipping us for in our energy and vision to focus on the kingdom work and a decaying infra structure, there will be Freed from battling over the basics of core beliefs The Christian Post printed an article, "PCUSA

How does this position help UPC achieve our mission?

It will help only to the extent that we "may" be in closer communication and be collaborators with a church or churches which have a very similar mission

See answer to previous question

How does this position encourage/develop the next generation of leaders?

It may make our position on particular issues/concerns clearer, at the risk of ambiguity relative to our present affiliation with PC USA, leading to uncertainty for the future of new leaders.

There is a strong focus in the Fellowship on training the next generation of leaders. Just as we want to produce the next generation of leaders who are biblically sound, grounded in their theology, the essential tenants and theology project within the Fellowship will give us some assurance that interns and future pastors we may want to seek out have come from churches with similar commitment to training.

How does this position challenge/ support pastoral staff?

Any positive challenge or support joining the fellowship would have on the pastoral staff would be offset by the distraction from work on our mission.

A key part of the Fellowship's mission is to nurture leaders and connect congregations. There will be opportunities to form church-to-church and leader-to-leader relationships and foster greater accountability for our church's mission. For example, our pastoral staff and elders will be challenged to complete an annual narrative report of how UPC fulfilled it's mission over the past year. Questions include,"How has UPC established new communities of worship over the past year," and "What ways has UPC sought the welfare of our community in Seattle?

flourishing churches that make disciples of Jesus other way around. The job of a denomination is to denomination is to serve the local church not the ourselves because we don't have to be trying to feeding the hungry, caring for the disenfranchised, coming alongside the broken, systems we will be linked with like minded sisters around. The idea is real simple: to build add value to the local church, not the other way with those who have drifted from Biblical faith. hold a boundary line of truth and grace partnered and brothers who spur us on to the work of God... communities we will see faith grow. Instead of incarnational work of Jesus in our local Our energy and vision will extend beyond preaching the gospel, discipling the nations etc. being in a "Big Tent" of watered down belief As the above states, when we are free to do the John Ortberg of Menlo Park writes,"The job of a

Scriptural faith with "flesh on the bones" life and praxis of what it means to live as people of faith gifts they bring to the church. One of the gifts the and corporately. difficult passages that growth occurs personally future are watching to see UPC walk this present given us. Hopefully our young leaders of the accountable with the vast resources God has leaders will grow us even more and help us be congregations concerned with mentoring youth of leaders. Interfacing with other large faith-full tradition of faith that shapes our next generation Mentoring children and interns is part of UPC's in Jesus Christ. The best thing I know is...that church can give youth is a rich heritage of authenticity or the lack of it. This is one of the they seem to have inherent detectors for if you really believe it. I love that about youth... path in faith, clarity and grace. It is in these more Jesus loves me and you...it's the good news. Young people want to know what you believe and

Joining the Fellowship and potentially aligning with a group like ECO offshoot promises to provide a richer circle of shared community for our Pastors where the emphasis is not so much on structure but vitality and growth. When you are on the fore front of ministry you don't want squabbling amongst those in leadership along side you. You don't want to be in protection mode, you want to be free to launch into your work and ministry knowing your peers in ministry understand the terrain and challenges. Mutual sharing and appreciation of the road will help fortify our Pastors and steel them for the challenges we face outside the church.

How does this position impact mission. I have a difficult time seeing how joining the around the world? invested in world mission. around the world. We are already significantly current efforts and commitment to missions

> similar global missions work. around the country (and world) who are doing new opportunities to partner with churches It doesn't change. If anything, it would provide

perspective of your position) joining Fellowship (from the What are concerns/disadvantages to

The controversy produced by joining the fellowship and the mistrust it would create (we resulting distraction are significant concerns. saw that from the letter read at session) with the

whether joining is viewed as positive and ministry-enhancing, or simply a conservative important. How it is communicated will impact is simply a lightning rod. reaction to changing ordination standards, which Messaging and communication will be vitally

impacted by this position? How are ordination standards

for UPC. ordination standards remain as they currently are Unknown - but by not joining the fellowship,

tenants of the Fellowship clearly summarize our current ordinational standards. decisions to impact our local ability to adhere to denomination still has the potential for PCUSA joining the Fellowship and remaining in the UPC's existing theological positions. However As of today - none whatsoever. The essentia

> of Mexico. Joining the Fellowship and potentially partners who have broken relationships with further steps would help align us with mission the PCUSA. Mexico, it's the whole Presbyterian denomination Mexico)." That's not one Presbyterian church in commitments(e.g. Presbyterian Church of missions.It reports,"even whole denominations the huge fractures made by the PCUSA in global the PCUSA First Presbyterian, Florence, SC cites and relationships have suffered a staggering, self and around the globe...our world mission efforts communities in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, million Eastern Orthodox in their various One example of how recent a General Assembly have broken fellowship with us over our current inflicted blow." A March 6,2012 article, Catholics, It is also an offense to more than 300 as understood by more than one billion Roman standards is a rejection of Scripture and tradition Presbyterians for Renewal Website July 14,2011 ordination standards. Ken Bailey, a 40 year partners around the world is the change in Theological Reasons for Seeking Dismissal from 'The recent decision to change our ordination these compelling comments in an article on the veteran Presbyterian missionary academic wrote decision effected our relationships with mission

communication and education is critical to another Reformed body. been at UPC in joining the Fellowship or in Ordination standards will remain as they have concrete guide of shouldering and doing the communicating grace is key. We all come from and so realignment is mandatory. It is important One wishes that our PCUSA had remained obviously necessary. Joining the Fellowship etc congregational change is difficult even when it is heavy lifting in these changes. places of brokenness so the cross can be a alienated further in this process and anchored but in truth their position has changed bringing the congregation through this process. may be perceived as loss and so a lot of Change is perceived as loss so any major that people who feel on the margins not be

THE FELLOWSHIP

Theology

PROJECT

—— Spring 2012 ——



Fellowship of presbyterians

Foreword

As the theological work group considered our charge to help the Fellowship and ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO) clarify theological identity, we discovered three tasks. The first task requires looking to the past. The second task requires a new statement. The third task requires commitment for the future. Each of the three tasks requires us to re-covenant.

The first task is to identify the statements of our confessional heritage that will connect us with the one holy catholic apostolic church and express our distinctively Reformed convictional documents in the Book of Confessions as the appropriate theological expression at this moment in our life together. These creeds, confessions, and catechisms have much-needed wisdom of proven worth for us, and can uniquely serve as the central documents for a new Fellowship that strives to retain meaningful connections among congregations, some of whom will be within the PC(USA), some of whom will be in ECO.

Critical to this first task is clear commitment to our confessional heritage in fresh and robust ways that announces what we mean when we say we adopt these documents, and defined accountability for keeping that covenant. The documents that compose the *Book of Confessions* are not seen in our rear view mirrors as road markers of where the church has been; they are seen through our windshield as faithful and sure guides for our perilous road ahead.

Casual affirmation of our theological heritage by our generation has severely weakened our worship and witness. We are squandering the gifts our confessional heritage could give us. We confess we have not been good stewards of the Faith. We must now reengage the Faith of the Church in ways that are more deeply committed to its truth and thus its value in ordering our life toward faithfulness. We have a strong conviction that our current theological failures are not the failures of the bishops at Nicea, the divines at Westminster, or

the confessors at Barmen; the failures are our own. Now is the time to confess it and strengthen our theological covenant.

We recognize that the Fellowship and/or ECO may, after a time of building and testing theological consensus among us, alter this judgment. But it is our opinion that the theological consensus among evangelicals has not been tested and, further, that to presume a consensus where one does not exist is to repeat one of the most significant theological failures of our generation. As members of the ordered ministries of the Church, we have agreed to the *Book of Confessions*. Let us keep that covenant that we may be found faithful to any new theological covenant we will make.

The first paper invites us to see the wisdom in reaffirming the creeds, confessions, and catechisms of the *Book of Confessions*, and invites us to say and live our confessions in ways that are profoundly faithful.

The second task is to identify and articulate the essentials of the Reformed Faith as expressed in these documents. To this end, we offer a new naming and explication of those essentials. This task helps us keep the renewed covenant we make in the first task.

While the value and role of the essentials have long been debated, the essentials themselves have not been identified for debate. Recent generations have acknowledged their presence—this is stated clearly in every officer's ordination questions—and yet simultaneously we have not bothered to locate them. We are impoverished for their absence.

We are also too broad. A collection of confessions lends itself to the wisdom of identifying what is essential within them. Our theological ideas and inclinations as a church are far too diffuse to unite us. We reject the proposition that theology divides. Instead, we affirm the proposition that truth tends toward unity, yet we are the first generation of Presbyterian

officers who do not have in the same ordination question the words truth and unity. Identifying essentials necessarily and rightly focuses our theological conversation and our life together.

This paper's depth may be challenging for some. We acknowledge this and we encourage you to read it more than once, and to read it together with others. This is a teaching moment. Let us use this to deepen our knowledge of the Reformed Faith.

The second paper invites us to discuss, debate, deliberate, and finally to decide what truths reside in the heart of our Faith and what is the proper Reformed expressions of those truths.

The third task is to identify the theological practices that will sustain us for the next generation and which we must, therefore, commit to and sustain. This will help us preserve and advance the work of the first two tasks.

Structures for doing theological work and for keeping theological integrity need to be established. Theology is not only to be established in our minds and become formative for our hearts, it is to be embodied in our manner of life and in the structures of the church. Companies of pastors and orders

of elders need to be formed. Teaching and ruling elders must relearn how to fulfill their missional callings in light of the Faith of the Church. Our faithfulness depends on it. We strongly propose that new structures be formed for the purpose of making a contribution to the theological well-being of the church so that our Faith can make its full contribution to the mission of the Church.

We propose the establishment of theological friendships in communities of mutual encouragement and accountability. This is an invitation for all ruling and teaching elders to commit to disciplined ways of life together.

Three things are necessary for the theological work of the church to flourish and in return for theology to help the church to flourish: adoption of theological confession with utmost sincerity, articulation of the confession with great clarity, and forming structures that sustain those convictions.

These three papers propose these three necessary tasks and invite us to covenant toward those ends. We offer them in the emerging work of The Fellowship of Presbyterians and ECO.

God help us.

Theology Taskforce

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Confessional Standards

The appropriate confessional standards for the Fellowship and ECO are the creeds, confessions, and catechisms in the Book of Confessions – The Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed, the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Second Helvetic Confession, the Westminster Confession, the Westminster Shorter Catechism and the Westminster Larger Catechism, the Theological Declaration of Barmen, the Confession of 1967, and A Brief Statement of Faith. This collection is theologically faithful, ecclesially appropriate, and organizationally suitable. The Book of Confessions contains the confessions that we have taken vows to receive. It also embodies the Reformed understanding of the way confessions function in the life of the church, an understanding that differs from two common approaches:

Doctrinal Progressives understand the church's confessional and theological tradition as an evolutionary development of doctrine in which the church's expression of the gospel becomes richer in each succeeding age. In this view, contemporary theology and new confessions of faith are more developed, better expressed, fuller apprehensions of truth than the faith of previous centuries. Our way is the way.

Doctrinal Restorationists understand the church's theological and confessional tradition as a series of missteps leading to imperfect understanding and inadequate articulation of the gospel. In this view, a particular moment in the church's confessional and theological tradition, such as the sixteenth century Augsburg Confession or the seventeenth century Westminster standards, is the pure faith of a theological golden age. Their way is the way.

The Reformed understanding of the church's confessional and theological tradition sees contemporary Christians as participants in an enduring theological and doctrinal conversation that shapes the patterns of the church's faith and life. Communities of believers from every time and place engage in a continuous discussion about the shape of Christian faith and life, an exchange that is maintained through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Today's church brings its insights into an ongoing dialogue with those who have lived and died the Faith before us. Voices from throughout the church's life contribute to the interchange ancient voices that articulate the enduring rule of faith, sixteenth and seventeenth century voices that shape the Reformed tradition, and twentieth century voices that proclaim the church's faith in challenging contexts. The confessions in the Book of Confessions were not arbitrarily included, but were selected to give faithful voice to the whole communion of saints.

The Book of Confessions is an appropriate expression of the Reformed commitment to honor our fathers and mothers in the Faith. It begins with two foundational creeds, shared throughout the whole Church. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is the decisive dogmatic articulation of Trinitarian faith. It establishes the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of Christian theology. The Apostles' Creed is the Baptismal creed that expresses the shared belief of the faithful as persons are incorporated into the body of Christ. Two Reformation confessions, Scots and Second Helvetic, and one Reformation catechism, Heidelberg, give voice to the dawning of the Reformed tradition. The seventeenth century Westminster standards powerfully express God's sovereignty over all of life. The Theological Declaration of Barmen, the Confession of 1967, and A Brief Statement of Faith articulate the church's fidelity to the gospel in the midst of uncongenial and sometimes hazardous cultures. These confessions, from widely different contexts, are complementary. They do not sing in unison, but in a rich harmony that glorifies God and deepens our enjoyment of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

Are these the only voices that could be included in the church's theological conversation? No, but they are faithful witnesses to the gospel and appropriate expressions of the Reformed perspective on Christian faith and life. Participating in their colloquy frees us from the narrow prison cell of our own time and place by listening to the voices of our brothers and sisters who struggled to be faithful in diverse circumstances. Through their confessions of faith we are privileged to hear their wisdom in the midst of our own struggle to be faithful. We overhear conversations among our forebears that expand and enrich our apprehension of the gospel. Sometimes we simply listen in on their discussion, at other times we pay particular attention to one of their voices, and many times we find ourselves participating actively in lively instruction.

The questions of our parents in the faith may not be identical to ours, but their different approaches enable us to understand our own questions better. Their answers may not be identical to ours, yet their answers startle us into new apprehensions of the truth. We may sometimes be puzzled by their particular questions or answers, but even that perplexity serves to clarify our own thinking and the shape of our faithfulness. Throughout the conversation we are aware that all councils may err, yet because we are not doctrinal progressives we acknowledge the confessions have a particular authority over us: we are answerable to them before they are answerable to us.

The confessions call the church to account. Because we are not traditionalists, we can be utterly honest about the church's past failings - crusades and inquisitions, easy acceptance of Christendom and easy dismissal of the leadership of women, neglect of evangelistic mission and excess of missionary zeal. Because we are not idealists we can be utterly honest about the church's current failings - marginalization of the Sacraments, indifference to theological labor, easy acceptance of cultural morality, neglect of evangelism, and inadequate mission. If we listen to our forebears in the Faith we will hear their hard questions addressed to us. Perhaps then we can be utterly honest about our own accommodations to the culture, our indifference to the proclamation of the gospel, and our abandonment of shared conviction and committed community in easy acquiescence to the individualism and localism of our time.

The confessions are not final authorities; Scripture is the authority that measures all doctrinal, confessional, and theological expression. The Reformed tradition has always understood that while confessional standards are subordinate to the Scriptures, they are, nonetheless, standards. They are not lightly drawn up or subscribed to, nor may they be ignored or dismissed. Being questioned by the confessions is not an exercise in servitude, but liberation from the tyranny of the present that enables us to live freely and faithfully within God's will.

As subordinate standards, the confessions are not freestanding authorities. They are subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, who is known through Scripture, the word of God. Subordination to the Lord and to Scripture's witness serves to locate confessional authority, however, not diminish it. The confessions provide reliable guidance to our reading and reception of Scripture, protecting us from self-absorbed interpretation, and opening us to Christ's way, Christ's truth, and Christ's life.

The Book of Confessions itself is not problematic. The problem with the Book of Confessions is the church's - the whole church's - neglect and misuse of its theological treasure. Too often, we have treated the confessions of the church as museum pieces, historical artifacts of what people used to believe long ago and far away. Too many of us have imagined that our own thoughts are sufficient for faithful proclamation of the gospel. We have been guilty of what C.S. Lewis called "chronological snobbery, the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited." We have also been guilty of reducing the confessions to theological and moral law books, selecting disembodied affirmations as elements in a logical proof. Our task is to put misuse of the confessions behind us, engaging in bold, faithful appropriations of the doctrinal and theological wisdom of the Book of Confessions, allowing them to enrich our faith and faithfulness.

The church's confessions are not marginal details in the church's life. The ordination vows made by most deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders commit us to receive and

adopt their essential tenets, and to be instructed, led, and guided by them. Our task is to be faithful to our vows, reading and studying the confessions, learning from them, teaching them, and living out their wisdom. Shared confession of faith shapes any serious community of faith, and the community's ordered ministries bear a particular obligation to order their confession around the church's creeds, confessions, and catechisms. Because confessional seriousness includes mutual responsibility and accountability, the church must be prepared to instruct, counsel with, or even discipline one ordained who rejects the faith expressed in the confessions.

Neither the Fellowship nor ECO can imagine that it should or could disavow the Reformed confessional heritage. Whatever the church's confessional and theological failings may be, they are the failings of all of us. The task now is to embody faithful ways of being Presbyterian. The most appropriate footing for a new venture is the faithful doctrinal and theological foundation provided by the creeds, confessions, and catechisms of the *Book of Confessions*.

Essential Tenets

Presbyterians have been of two minds about essential tenets. We recognize that just as there are some central and foundational truths of the gospel affirmed by Christians everywhere, so too there are particular understandings of the gospel that define the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition. All Christians must affirm the central mysteries of the faith, and all those who are called to ordered ministries in a Presbyterian church must also affirm the essential tenets of the Reformed tradition. Recognizing the danger in reducing the truth of the gospel to propositions that demand assent, we also recognize that when the essentials become a matter primarily of individual discernment and local affirmation, they lose all power to unite us in common mission and ministry.

Essential tenets are tied to the teaching of the confessions as reliable expositions of Scripture. The essential tenets call out for explication, not as another confession, but as indispensable indicators of confessional convictions about what Scripture leads us to believe and do. Essential tenets do not replace the confessions, but rather witness to the confessions' common core. This document is thus intended not as a new confession but as a guide to the corporate exploration of and commitment to the great themes of Scripture and to the historic Reformed confessions that set forth those themes.

The great purpose toward which each human life is drawn is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Each member of the church glorifies God by recognizing and naming His glory, which is the manifestation and revelation of His own nature. Each member of the church enjoys God by being so united with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit as to become a participant in that divine nature, transformed from one degree of glory to another and escorted by Christ into the loving communion of the Trinity. So we confess our faith not as a matter of dispassionate intellectual assent, but rather as an act by which we give God glory and announce our membership in the body of Christ. We trust that when God's glory is so lifted up and when His nature is thus made manifest in the life of the body, the church will be a light that draws people from every tribe and tongue and nation to be reconciled to God.

I. God's Word: The Authority for Our Confession

The clearest declaration of God's glory is found in His Word, both incarnate and written. The Son eternally proceeds from the Father as His Word, the full expression of the Father's nature, and since in the incarnation the Word became flesh all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are offered to His disciples. The written Word grants us those treasures, proclaims the saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and graciously teaches all that is necessary for faith and life. We glorify God

by recognizing and receiving His authoritative selfrevelation, both in the infallible Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and also in the incarnation of God the Son. We affirm that the same Holy Spirit who overshadowed the virgin Mary also inspired the writing and preservation of the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit testifies to the authority of God's Word and illumines our hearts and minds so that we might receive both the Scriptures and Christ Himself aright.

We confess that God alone is Lord of the conscience, but this freedom is for the purpose of allowing us to be subject always and primarily to God's Word. The Spirit will never prompt our conscience to conclusions that are at odds with the Scriptures that He has inspired. The revelation of the incarnate Word does not minimize, qualify, or set aside the authority of the written Word. We are happy to confess ourselves captive to the Word of God, not just individually, but also as members of a community of faith, extending through time and around the globe. In particular, we join with other members of the Presbyterian and Reformed community to affirm the secondary authority of the Book of Confessions as a faithful exposition of the Word of God.

II. Trinity and Incarnation: The Two Central Christian Mysteries

A. Trinity

The triune nature of God is the first great mystery of the Christian faith. With Christians everywhere, we worship the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - who is both one essence and three persons. God is infinite, eternal, immutable, impassible, and ineffable. He cannot be divided against Himself, nor is He becoming more than He has been, since there is no potential or becoming in Him. He is the source of all goodness, all truth and all beauty, of all love and all life, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. The three persons are consubstantial with one another, being both coeternal, and coequal, such that there are not three gods, nor are there three parts of God, but rather three persons within the one Godhead. The Son is eternally begotten from the Father, and the Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son. All three persons are worthy of worship and praise.

God has no need of anyone or anything beyond Himself. Yet in grace this Triune God is the one Creator of all things. The ongoing act of creation is further manifested in God's gracious sovereignty and providence, maintaining the existence of the world and all living creatures for the sake of His own glory. He is the Holy One, the ground of all being, whose glory is so great that for us to see Him is to die. Yet He has made the creation to reflect His glory, and He has made human beings in His own image, with a unique desire to know Him and a

capacity for relationship with Him. Since our God is a consuming fire whom we in our sin cannot safely approach, He has approached us by entering into our humanity in Jesus Christ.

B. Incarnation

This is the second great mystery of the Christian faith, affirmed by all Christians everywhere: that Jesus Christ is both truly God and truly human. As to His divinity, He is the Son, the second person of the Trinity, being of one substance with the Father; as to His humanity, He is like us in every way but sin, of one substance with us, like us in having both a human soul and a human body. As to His divinity, He is eternally begotten of the Father; as to His humanity, He is born of the virgin Mary, conceived by the Holy Spirit. As to His divinity, His glory fills heaven and earth; as to His humanity, His glory is shown in the form of a suffering servant, most clearly when He is lifted up on the cross in our place.

We confess the mystery of His two natures, divine and human, in one person. We reject any understanding of the communication of attributes that must result in a blending of the two natures such that Jesus Christ is neither truly God nor truly human. We insist upon sufficient distinction between the two natures to preserve the truth of the incarnation, that Jesus Christ is indeed Immanuel, God-with-us, not one who used to be God, nor one who has merely been sent from God. Rather, in His coming we have seen God's glory, for Jesus is the exact imprint of God's very being and in Him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. The divinity of the Son is in no way impaired, limited, or changed by His gracious act of assuming a human nature, and that His true humanity is in no way undermined by His continued divinity. This is a mystery that we cannot explain, but we affirm it with joy and confidence.

This mystery of the incarnation is ongoing, for the risen Jesus, who was sent from the Father, has now ascended to the Father in His resurrected body and remains truly human. He is bodily present at the right hand of the Father. When we are promised that one day we will see Him face to face, we acknowledge that it is the face of Jesus of Nazareth we will someday see. The one who, for us and for our salvation, was born of Mary, died at Calvary, and walked with disciples to Emmaus is the same Jesus Christ who is now ascended and who will one day return visibly in the body to judge the living and the dead.

Jesus promised His disciples that He would not leave them comfortless when He ascended into heaven, but would ask the Father to send them the Holy Spirit as a comforter and advocate. We are able to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and God only through the work of the Holy Spirit. He comes to us as He came to the gathered disciples at Pentecost: to kindle our faith, to embolden our witness, and to accompany us in mission.

III. Essentials of the Reformed Tradition

A. God's grace in Christ

God declared that the world He created was good and that human beings, made in His own image, were very good. The present disordered state of the world, in which we and all things are subject to misery and to evil, is not God's doing, but is rather a result of humanity's free, sinful rebellion against God's will. God created human beings from the dust of the earth and His own breath, to be His images and representatives, conduits of God's grace to the creation. Since the fall our natural tendency is to abuse and exploit the creation, preferring evil to goodness. God also created human beings to speak His grace and truth to one another, to be helpers who are fit for one another, so that our social relationships would strengthen our ability to serve and obey Him. Since the fall, our natural tendency is to engage in relationships of tyranny and injustice with one another, in which power is used not to protect and serve but to demean. God further created human beings with the capacity for relationship with Him, with His law written on our hearts so that we had the ability to worship Him in love and obey Him by living holy lives. Since the fall, our natural tendency is to hate God and our neighbor, to worship idols of our own devising rather than the one true God.

As a result of sin, human life is poisoned by everlasting death. No part of human life is untouched by sin. Our desires are no longer trustworthy guides to goodness, and what seems natural to us no longer corresponds to God's design. We are not merely wounded in our sin; we are dead, unable to save ourselves. Apart from God's initiative, salvation is not possible for us. Our only hope is God's grace. We discover in Scripture that this is a great hope, for our God is the One whose mercy is from everlasting to everlasting.

This grace does not end when we turn to sin. Although we are each deserving of God's eternal condemnation, the eternal Son assumed our human nature, joining us in our misery and offering Himself on the cross in order to free us from slavery to death and sin. Jesus takes our place both in bearing the weight of condemnation against our sin on the cross and in offering to God the perfect obedience that humanity owes to Him but is no longer able to give. All humanity participates in the fall into sin. Those who are united through faith with Jesus Christ are fully forgiven from all our sin, so that there is indeed a new creation. We are declared justified, not because of any good that we have done, but only because of God's grace extended to us in Jesus Christ. In union with Christ through the power of the Spirit we are brought into right relation with the Father, who receives us as His adopted children.

Jesus Christ is the only Way to this adoption, the sole path by which sinners become children of God, for He is the only-begotten Son, and it is only in union with Him that a believer is able to know God as Father. Only in Jesus Christ is the truth about the Triune God, fully and perfectly revealed, for only He is the Truth, only He has seen the Father, and only He can make the Father known. Only Jesus Christ is the new Life

that is offered, for He is the bread from heaven and the fountain of living water, the one by whom all things were made, in whom all things hold together. The exclusivity of these claims establishes that God's love is not impersonal, but a particular and intimate love in which each individual child of God is called by name and known as precious; that God's love is not only acceptance, but a transforming and effective love in which His image within us is restored so that we are capable of holy living.

B. Election for salvation and service

The call of God to the individual Christian is not merely an invitation that each person may accept or reject by his or her own free will. Having lost true freedom of will in the fall, we are incapable of turning toward God of our own volition. God chooses us for Himself in grace before the foundation of the world, not because of any merit on our part, but only because of His love and mercy. Each of us is chosen in Christ, who is eternally appointed to be head of the body of the elect, our brother and our high priest. He is the one who is bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, our divine Helper who is also our Bridegroom, sharing our human nature so that we may see His glory. We who receive Him and believe in His name do so not by our own will or wisdom, but because His glory compels us irresistibly to turn toward Him. By His enticing call on our lives, Jesus enlightens our minds, softens our hearts, and renews our wills, restoring the freedom that we lost in the fall.

We are all sinners who fall short of God's glory, and we all deserve God's eternal judgment. Apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ, we are incapable of being in God's presence, incapable of bearing the weight of His glory. We rejoice that Jesus Christ offers us safe conduct into the heart of God's consuming and purifying fire, shielding us with His perfect humanity and transforming us by His divine power. Having received such grace, we extend grace to others.

We are not elect for our own benefit alone. God gathers His covenant community to be an instrument of His saving purpose. Through His regenerating and sanctifying work, the Holy Spirit grants us faith and enables holiness, so that we may be witnesses of God's gracious presence to those who are lost. The Spirit gathers us in a community that is built up and equipped to be light, salt, and yeast in the world. Christ sends us into the world to make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that Christ has commanded us. We are now in service to God's plan for the fullness of time: uniting all things in heaven and earth to Himself. To this end, we preach Christ, calling all persons to repent and believe the gospel. We also care for the natural world, claim all areas of culture in the name of Jesus, serve the poor, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, and defend the helpless. We do this work not with any thought that we are able to bring in the kingdom, but in the confident hope that God's kingdom is surely coming, a day when suffering and death will pass away and when God will live among His people.

C. Covenant life in the church

We are elect in Christ to become members of the community of the new covenant. This covenant, which God Himself guarantees, unites us to God and to one another. Already in the creation, we discover that we are made to live in relationships to others, male and female, created together in God's image. In Christ, we are adopted into the family of God and find our new identity as brothers and sisters of one another, since we now share one Father. Our faith requires our active participation in that covenant community.

Jesus prays that His followers will all be one, and so we both pray and work for the union of the church throughout the world. Even where institutional unity does not seem possible, we are bound to other Christians as our brothers and sisters. In Christ the dividing wall of hostility created by nationality, ethnicity, gender, race, and language differences is brought down. God created people so that the rich variety of His wisdom might be reflected in the rich variety of human beings, and the church must already now begin to reflect the eschatological reality of people from every tribe, and tongue, and nation bringing the treasures of their kingdoms into the new city of God.

Within the covenant community of the church, God's grace is extended through the preaching of the Word, the administration of the Sacraments, and the faithful practice of mutual discipline. First, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the word proclaimed may indeed become God's address to us. The Spirit's illuminating work is necessary both for the one who preaches and for those who listen. Second, the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are signs that are linked to the things signified, sealing to us the promises of Jesus. In the Baptism of infants, we confess our confidence in God's gracious initiative, that a baby who cannot turn to God is nonetheless claimed as a member of the covenant community, a child of God, cleansed by grace and sealed by the Spirit; in the Baptism of adults, we confess our confidence that God's grace can make us new creations at any stage of our lives. In the Lord's Supper, we confess that as we eat the bread and share one cup the Spirit unites us to the ascended Christ, so that His resurrection life may nourish, strengthen, and transform us. Third, the community of the Church practices discipline in order to help one another along the path to new life, speaking the truth in love to one another, bearing one another's burdens, and offering to one another the grace of Christ.

D. Faithful stewardship of all of life

The ministries of the church reflect the three-fold office of Christ as prophet, priest, and king – reflected in the church's ordered ministries of teaching elders, deacons, and ruling elders. We affirm that men and women alike are called to all the ministries of the Church, and that every member is called to share in all of Christ's offices within the world beyond the church. Every Christian is called to a prophetic life, proclaiming the good news to the world and enacting that good news. Every Christian is called to extend the lordship of Christ to every corner of the world. And every Christian is called to participate in Christ's priestly, mediatorial

work, sharing in the suffering of the world in ways that extend God's blessing and offering intercession to God on behalf of the world. We are equipped to share in these offices by the Holy Spirit, who conforms us to the pattern of Christ's life.

Jesus teaches us that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind. There is no part of human life that is off limits to the sanctifying claims of God. We reject the claim that love of any sort is self-justifying; we affirm that all our affections and desires must be brought under God's authority. We reject the claim that human souls are unaffected by the fall and remain naturally inclined to God; we affirm that soul and body alike must be cleansed and purified in order to love God properly. We reject the claim that the life of the mind is independent from faith; we affirm that unless we believe we cannot properly understand either God or the world around us. Historically, the Presbyterian tradition has been especially called to explore what it is to love God with all our minds, being committed to the ongoing project of Christian education and study at all levels of Christian life.

E. Living in obedience to the Word of God Progress in holiness is an expected response of gratitude to the grace of God, which is initiated, sustained, and fulfilled by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. The first response of gratitude is prayer, and the daily discipline of prayer – both individually and together – should mark the Christian life. The life of prayer includes praise to God for His nature and works, sincere confession of our sin, and intercession for the needs of those we know and for the needs of the world. As we practice the discipline of regular self-examination and confession, we are especially guided by the Ten Commandments. We therefore hold one another accountable to:

- worship God alone, living all of life to His glory, renouncing all idolatry and all inordinate loves that might lead us to trust in any other help;
- 2. worship God in humility, being reticent in either describing or picturing God, recognizing that right worship is best supported not by our own innovative practices but through the living preaching of the Word and the faithful administration of the Sacraments;
- 3. eliminate from both speech and thought any blasphemy, irreverence, or impurity;
- 4. observe the Sabbath as a day of worship and rest, being faithful in gathering with the people of God;
- 5. give honor toward those set in authority over us and practice mutual submission within the community of the church;
- 6. eradicate a spirit of anger, resentment, callousness, violence, or bitterness, and instead cultivate a spirit of gentleness, kindness, peace, and love; recognize and honor the image of God in every human being

- from conception to natural death.
- 7. maintain chastity in thought and deed, being faithful within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman as established by God at the creation or embracing a celibate life as established by Jesus in the new covenant;
- practice right stewardship of the goods we have been given, showing charity to those in need and offering generous support of the Church and its ministries;
- pursue truth, even when such pursuit is costly, and defend truth when it is challenged, recognizing that truth is in order to goodness and that its preservation matters;
- resist the pull of envy, greed, and acquisition, and instead cultivate a spirit of contentment with the gifts God has given us.

In Jesus Christ we see the perfect expression of God's holy will for human beings offered to God in our place. His holy life must now become our holy life. In Christ, God's will is now written on our hearts, and we look forward to the day when we will be so confirmed in holiness that we will no longer be able to sin. As the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, Jesus leads us along the path of life toward that goal, bringing us into ever deeper intimacy with the Triune God, in whose presence is fullness of joy.

The Theological Project

The Church has a Faith without which she cannot live faithfully.

Truth leads to duty, faith to practice. A church that wants to be a servant found faithful to its commission must be a steward of the Faith entrusted to its care. A fellowship that desires to be an effective witness to the gospel must know the gospel. An apostolic church must not only live a life like that of the apostles, it must teach what the apostles taught.

Some generations of believers have tried to live faithfully without a shared Faith; all have failed. Our generation may be particularly tempted to try. Forging theological consensus is hard work in any generation, but ours seems to have concluded that it is impossible work. Private and partisan interpretations are now considered inflexible and intractable. We have forgotten the humble recognition that ambiguities exist and must be respected, and now dwell in a land where ambiguities are preferred and certainties are suspect. We are coached to celebrate diversity of theological conviction, rather than seeing this as a sign of important work yet to be done.

Theological debates in the church have not always been filled with grace, or even understanding, and many have been unnecessarily divisive. The formative ecclesial debates of earlier history are viewed as arcane. Doctrinal work is unfavorably compared to relationship building as if the two were mutually exclusive. Teaching elders attempt to teach how to live lives faithful to the truth without doing the required work of laying foundations of the truth in the hearts and minds of the congregation. Ruling elders are equipped to be managers of church life rather than able to teach the Faith.

Although these realities are manifest somewhat differently in churches and among leaders who identify themselves as progressive or evangelical, neglect of the substance of the Faith is wide and deep. As a result, all other matters suffer—the strength of disciples, the health of congregations, the effectiveness of councils. Disciplined attention to the Word gives gifts to the Church that it cannot receive elsewhere or by any other means.

Renewal of theological work at the core of our common life is not only an acknowledged need but, in the providence of God, may be a blessed provision. Throughout history, the reformation of the Church has followed theological work — work that grew from recommitment to the Faith. In turn, the reformation of the Church has fostered a recommitment to theological work.

Now is the time to reengage the theological work, for this moment, and for the next generations.

Renewed commitment to sustained conversation is needed. At its best, sustained conversation is characterized by prayerful

and rigorous study of the Scripture with attention to clarifying the Reformed theological lens through which we read the Scriptures, by grateful listening to the voice of the church around the world and through the ages, and application of theological wisdom to every part of life before God and for the world.

Toward these ends, we now commit ourselves to the formation of theological friendships in communities that include all teaching and ruling elders — gatherings of elders which covenant to study and learn together, providing mutual encouragement and accountability for the sake of sustaining and advancing the theological and missional work of the church.

Necessary to this commitment are:

- 1. Identifying the best practices of current theological projects and relationships within the Church that will help guide the shape of these theological friendships.
- Building the structures that connect elders with each other locally, regionally, and nationally in environments that establish and sustain theological friendships.

These theological friendships should strive to:

- transform life and ministry,
- be sustained over the years,
- include a breadth of participants
 - · gender, age, ethnic and global communities
 - · other Reformed churches
 - other orthodox and evangelical theological traditions
- engage other theological friendships, thus forming broadening communities, worship and witness together.

An invitation is now offered in an excellent resource, "A Pastoral Rule," developed by the Re-forming Ministry Program of the PC(USA)'s Office of Theology and Worship. This resource invites us to commit to personal disciplines, conduct in ministry that is holy, and mutual encouragement and accountability. It is offered to the whole church as a tool for the formation of theological friendships that sustain us and are sustained over time. We propose that the Fellowship and ECO accept that invitation to adapt and then adopt "The Pastoral Rule."

These three theological projects are offered for broad immediate consideration:

- Recommitment to a particular confessional heritage as an immediate core constituent of our renewed common life, however that common life is re-formed.
- Identification and affirmation of the essential tenets of the Reformed Faith.
- Commitment to re-engaging the theological enterprise broadly and deeply.

Further advance on these three projects will be made as we put our theology on the table for public discussion, deliberation, and decision; share best practices; form theological-missional relationships; build the structures; and covenant together.

Questions for immediate consideration:

Do we consider the proposal to reaffirm the Book of Confessions as we work to build and test theological consensus among us, to be the right judgment to make at this time? Is this an adequate and helpful articulation of the essentials of the Faith as expressed in Reformed ways, and will we sincerely adopt it? What theological friendships will we form, what practices will we commit to, and what structures will we build for mutual encouragement and accountability?

The theological project is required of the Church, and now is re-engaged by this Fellowship within the Church. The invitation is now offered. How will you respond?

ADDENDUM

Suggested questions for the covenanting gatherings of theological friends:

What has the Spirit gathered the Church to be? What has the Spirit sent the Church to do? Always and everywhere; here and now.

What is the authority of Scripture in the actual life of the church? How will we teach and obey the Scripture?

What does it mean to be saved? What is the gospel we are to preach? What is the shape of our corporate and individual lives that are formed by that gospel?

Elders, ruling as well as teaching, are to be equipped to teach. Teach what, to whom, how? Ruling elders are to measure out the patterns of faithfulness for the congregation. What are those patterns, and how are they measured?

In a time of both ecclesial division and realignment, how can schism among parts of the church be diminished and how can reconnection with the whole church be increased?

The Church has a Faith without which she cannot live faithfully. What is that Faith? What is faithful living?



The mission of The Fellowship of Presbyterians is to build *flourishing churches* that make *disciples of Jesus Christ*.

OUR VALUES

Jesus-Shaped Identity

We believe Jesus Christ must be at the center of our lives and making disciples of Jesus at the core of our ministry.

Biblical Integrity

We believe the Bible is the unique and authoritative Word of God, that teaches all that is necessary for faith and life. The prominence of God's Word over our lives shapes our priorities, and the unrivaled authority of the Bible directs our actions to be in concert with Christ's very best for our lives.

Thoughtful Theology

We believe in theological education, constant learning, and the life of the mind; celebrating this as one of the treasures of our Reformed heritage.

Accountable Community

We believe guidance is a corporate spiritual experience. We want to connect leaders to one another in healthy relationships of accountability, synergy, and care.

Egalitarian Ministry

We believe in unleashing the ministry gifts of women, men, and every ethnic group.

Missional Centrality

We believe in living out the whole of the Great Commission — including evangelism, spiritual formation, compassion, and redemptive justice — in our communities and around the world.

Center-Focused Spirituality

We believe in calling people to the core of what it means to be followers of Jesus — what "mere Christianity" is and does — and not fixate on the boundaries.

Leadership Velocity

We believe the work of identifying and developing gospel-centered leaders is critical for the church, and a great leadership culture is risk-taking, innovative, and organic.

Kingdom Vitality

We believe congregations should vigorously reproduce new missional communities to expand the Kingdom of God.



Making a covenant is a highly personal decision. It acknowledges that something beyond us is more important than ourselves. It is only in the keeping of such personal commitments however, that meaningful communities are formed and life in the church flourishes. When one part of the Body rejoices, we all rejoice and when one part suffers, we all suffer: Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ ... Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (1 Corinthians 12: 12, 27)

I. Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (*Philippians 2: 9-11*)

• Because Jesus Christ is Lord, I will seek to be subject to Him in all areas of my life: (Matthew 22: 37-40)

II. You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

(1 Corinthians 6: 19b-20)

Because my life is not my own...

- I will take responsibility for my thoughts and actions: (1 Timothy 6: 11b-12)
- I will make the glory and enjoyment of God my focus: (Westminster Larger Catechism, Q-1)
- I will, relying on the Holy Spirit, rejoice in the Lord at all times: (Philippians 4: 4-7)
- Scripture will be my final authority in all decisions, choices, and actions: (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

III. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. (Acts 20:28)

Because the church is not my own...

- I will actively support, pray for, and encourage the ordained leaders of my congregation, serving when called in accordance with my spiritual gifts: (Hebrews 13:7)
- I will fulfill my part of the baptismal covenant, nurturing children and those new in the faith: (Deuteronomy 6: 6-9)
- I will hold my personal preferences lightly and guard the good of the whole: (Philippians 2: 1-4)

IV. The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it; the world, and all who live in it... (Psalm 24:1)

Because the world is not my own...

- I will commit to a biblical tithe of my assets, joyfully giving additional offerings whenever and wherever possible to support the work of the gospel and the welfare of God's people. (2 Chronicles 31:12)
- I will consider my tithes and gifts as an expression of gratitude to the One who has been extravagantly generous toward me: (Psalm 116: 12, 17)
- I will be a faithful steward of God's creation. I will treat the creation as a gift to be cared for and used in ways which honor and glorify the Creator: (Genesis 2:15)
- I will behold the creation as a 'theater of God's glory', praising God for every reminder of His presence and love: (Psalm 19:1)
- I will honor the sanctity of human life above the claims of human freedom: (Psalm 8: 4-5)
- I will treat others with respect, honoring the image of God in them, however broken. I will seek God's peace and biblical reconciliation in all times and places: (1 Peter 2:17)
- I will sacrificially provide for the needs of the poor and the oppressed, the neglected and the abused, the widow and the orphan: (Isaiah 58:6-7)

V. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5: 22-23)

Because the Holy Spirit nurtures new and fruitful lives...

- I will yield to the work of the Spirit in my life so that I will be transformed from the inside out: (Romans 12: 1-2)
- I will pray that God's transforming work in my life will serve Him: (Ephesians 2:10)
- I will set my gaze upon Jesus so that I may become what I behold, for the good of the church and the glory of God: (2 Corinthians 3: 18)

VI. Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. (Hebrews 12: 1-2a)

Because I do not journey through this life alone, but in the company of others and under a great cloud of witnesses...

- I will be an encourager of my brothers and sisters: (Hebrews 3: 13)
- I will gather regularly with my brothers and sisters, hearing the word of God, participating in the sacraments and preparing to be sent into God's world: (Hebrews 10: 24-25)
- I will give others who sign this covenant permission to both nurture and admonish me: (Proverbs 1:5)

Printed Name		Signature		
Date	Email		. Phone	



Phone Conversation with Scott Mann

Associate Pastor for Leadership Development

Bellevue Presbyterian Church (a member of the Fellowship of Presbyterians)

Note: Bellevue Presbyterian is a very large church on the Eastside of Seattle. The church website has the best materials that I have found so far concerning the rationale behind their decision to join FOP

Question: Will joining FOP make any real difference at PCBW?

Scott:

It depends on the character of your leadership (staff and session) and of the congregation. It is very common for congregants to be more diverse theologically and politically than the leadership of the church.

The bottom line is that FOP wants participation to push your church ahead in its mission.

Don't join the FOP if it will stir up trouble in the congregation. Keep in mind that individuals may join as well as entire congregations.

The goal of FOP is **flourishing** congregations

FOP does not want people to leave congregations

Here are some things to think about

1) IF your session decides to associate (this is a session decision) with FOP how will you communicate with the congregation???

- 2) Our session decided to go forward **but we did not say anything in worship, etc.** This was a conscious decision of the part of our leadership. We did, however, post all of our thinking, etc. on our website and addressed questions as they arose.
- 3) We do not think that it is helpful to the average person to get them involved in the denominational controversies. What good does that do for their walk with Christ??

The two questions your session needs to answer are: 1) what to do, if anything? and 2) How to communicate that to the congregation?

There are many PCUSA churches that wish they could start all over because they DID not adequately answer both questions before they charged ahead!!! Big mistakes have been made by not being on top of the communication question. Many now regret their actions. Do you really need to involve your congregation??

How big a commitment is joining FOP?

This depends on what you are already doing. FOP requires that your pastors participate in a covenant group with fellow pastors. Your elders will have to agree to participate in **Affinity Groups** made up of elders from other churches who meet at least one time per year. FOP has a goal of training elders to be spiritual leaders rather than just church administrators. Bellevue Pres was already doing these things so joining FOP did not add much to our responsibilities.

FOP will not tell you how to do these things but will expect your leaders to follow through. I have heard terrific reports from elders attending **Affinity Groups.**

Why not join the FOP?

The DNA of FOP is a huge missional commitment. It is attempting to shift congregations into high gear in reaching their communities for Christ.

If your church is the type that just wants to have an inspiring worship service once a week and they are not really interested in reaching the community for Christ and serving the poor **do not join FOP.** If you recognize this and want to change it you will be welcome.

Do not join FOP for theological purity. It is not a home for **mad, "hair** on fire" evangelicals.

And don't blame the denomination.....they are not stopping you from pursuing your mission.

Finally, don't take any action in regard to denominational controversies until your new senior pastor is in place.

Phone Conversation With Carl Pearson Elder, University Presbyterian Church Member of COM, Seattle Presbytery

Note: University Presbyterian Church is located about a block north of the University of Washington campus in Seattle. Their church is a member of the Fellowship of Presbyterians.

Question: Tell me about the decision to join FOP.

Carl:

Our pastors and elders anticipated the actions of GA well ahead of time and wanted to be in a proactive rather than a reactive stance so we joined FOP in 2013. We did not want our participation in the FOP to be a reaction to the ordination and marriage issues.

The FOP is not focused on the gay issue. It is focused on building thriving congregations.

I served on the *Denominational Concerns* task force. We researched and debated three options: 1) remain in the PC (USA) as is; 2) join FOP as a PC(USA) church; 3) move to ECO. Our committee settled on #2 and session voted to go with our recommendation.

We found that about 10% of our members (3,000+) pay any attention to the national church. Of the 10% they are about evenly split on the ordination and marriage issues. A small number of people (of the 10%) will not be happy whatever you do. We have lost a few people.

One of the reasons that we recommended joining the FOP is that they have clearly stated the *essential tenets* of the faith as our staff and elders understand them. This allows us to have a clear statement of what we believe and practice. FOP is who we are and always have been.

We also joined the FOP because it provided a vehicle to maintain and build historic relationships like our relationship with Menlo Park Presbyterian which has moved to ECO.

Your elders need to understand that FOP is not some kind of waiting room for churches wishing to leave the PC(USA).

The reports we are getting from our pastors and elders who have attended FOP national meetings and MAGs (Mission Affinity Groups) is very positive. How to do ministry is the main topic. The "gay" deal is old news and ignored. FOP is not about pushing against the "gay movement."

Explain to your elders that the PC(USA) is becoming more like the Baptists in that local control is gaining more authority and the denomination less authority. I also serve the Seattle Presbytery. Currently I am on Committee on Ministry. Our Presbytery is really out in front in this time of upheaval in the following ways: 1) Our presbytery attorney, David Brenner, who is also an elder at UPC has drafted a "gracious separation" policy which we (Seattle Presbytery) have now used to release 3 churches. While there are no formulas in regard to property our presbytery has no desire to make it financially difficult for churches wishing to leave. Two of the three churches have requested that they remain members of Seattle Presbytery! 2) We are working to develop ordination questions that acknowledge that some seeking ordination are headed toward progressive churches and others toward conservative churches. We do not want to use candidate examination as a battle ground for continuing disagreement. 3) We have a candidate for ordination at UPC who has requested that she be ordained by ECO. ECO has brought this to the attention of the Seattle Presbytery and both seem to be working together with UPC to grant this request.

Things are not nearly so pleasant in Eastern Washington. The Central Washington Presbytery has virtually collapsed. They have experienced mass exodus of members and churches as has the small presbytery in Alaska.

Phone Conversation With

Mike Nieto, Associate Pastor Covenant Presbyterian Church, Boise

Note: The FOP office suggested that I talked with this church as they recently joined and are close to us. Having not received a call back from their senior pastor I finally called the office and asked to talk with anyone that might comment of their decision to join FOP. Mike took the call and here is what I learned.

Mike and his wife, Kelly, are co-associate pastors and have been on the staff of this church for about 2 years.

The church joined the FOP this past spring following a sermon series on the essential tenets

Although not a requirement, the session decided to ask the congregation to vote on the decision to join FOP. About 75 to 80 percent voted in favor but the process opened up strong emotional reactions with a number of people departing as they felt that joining FOP was not an adequate response.

Not long after this the session voted to recommend that the congregation seek dismissal from the PC(USA).

Prior to the congregational vote, the senior pastor (Phil Moran) and 9 of 11 elders resigned and chartered a new EPC church that now meets in a funeral home.

The Boise Presbytery has formed an Administrative Commission which has just begun to act as the session of the church.

I am pretty ambivalent about our decision to join the FOP. I think it is good to have our beliefs clearly stated but I am pretty burned out by the breakup of our church family. And, I think that joining the FOP has caused some amount of distrust within the Boise Presbytery.

Telephone Conversation

H. Stanley Wood Adjunct Professor of Congregational Leadership & Evangelism Fuller Seminary And

Executive Director of Sowers' Field

Question: What can you tell me about the Fellowship of Presbyterians?

Stan:

It is all about calling the church back to its historic roots.

It is about fellowship NOT schism.

It is calling people to stay in the church even as it embraces ECO.

I have known Jim Singleton for many years.

I have not personally joined the FOP but I am in complete solidarity with them.

You can take full advantage of their meetings, videos, mailings and meeting without being a member.

The PC (USA) is in a horrible mess. I am working with the church in Jackson Hole and it appears that the denominational issues are having a negative impact on large gifts as people worry about the property issues should the denomination continue to decline.

One advantage to joining the FOP is that it will clarify your theological stance.

In your resort setting I would expect that most people choose to worship there for reasons OTHER than it being Presbyterian. I'd think that most of your congregants are not very interested in denominational concerns.

The purpose of joining the FOP is to clarify your stance while staying in the PC (USA).