

Commitment to Welcome and Inclusion, adopted by Richmond Church of the Brethren 11/20/11

There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28, CEB)

One of the religion scholars came up. Hearing the lively exchanges of question and answer and seeing how sharp Jesus was in his answers, he put in his question: "Which is most important of all the commandments?" Jesus said, "The first in importance is, 'Listen, Israel: The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.' And here is the second: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.' There is no other commandment that ranks with these." (Mark 12:28-31, The Message)

Throughout the ages God has shown compassion and favor to the poor, marginalized, and outcast. The stories and teachings of the Bible remind us of God's timeless call to humbly love our neighbors, strangers, and even enemies. Though our culture encourages us to fear and distrust those who differ from us, we must resist this temptation, for the Spirit speaks through a diversity of voices and experiences.

Great injustices of discrimination and oppression have been perpetuated throughout history in the name of the Christian faith. In far too many cases, the church at large has reflected the isolation and exclusion of a broken humanity instead of providing refuge in the inclusive, reconciling love of Jesus. We recognize that we too are sinners, in need of God's grace, seeking to turn from these patterns of brokenness to more fully embody the hospitality and embrace of our Creator.

As a church and as individuals, we look to Jesus and his earliest followers as our model. We see him dining with tax collectors and Pharisees alike, bringing healing to both Jews and Gentiles, welcoming and honoring women and children, redefining familial ties, restoring the sick and possessed, and expanding our understanding of God's love. We see the early church including former outsiders, extending into new cultural settings, and engaging in hospitality and accommodation.

In response to these understandings and convictions, we commit to this statement of welcome:

Following the example of Jesus, the Richmond Church of the Brethren welcomes and invites the full participation of every person. We embrace diversity in age, nationality, race and ethnicity, marital and family status, gender identity and sexual orientation, physical and mental ability, educational background, socioeconomic situation, and faith experience.

We are especially mindful of welcoming and affirming our lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) sisters and brothers. While much progress has been made in accepting and celebrating diversity within the church, many communities of faith continue to condemn LGBTQ persons, or at least tolerate condemnation and exclusion through silence. We believe such actions are inconsistent with the good news of Jesus. Together we pray for and work toward the day when all mutual relationships that express Christ-like love are seen with the same legitimacy and respect.

In all aspects of our life together as a congregation – including worship, fellowship, service, outreach, membership, leadership, and employment – we will strive to live into this statement of welcome to the best of our ability. Should the extension of this welcome, modeled after Christ's radical love, bring us into conflict with denominational or district policy or governmental law, we will prayerfully discern the Spirit's guidance, the teachings of scripture, and our tradition's wisdom, to arrive at a shared understanding of the mind of Christ prior to taking action.

We know that some sisters and brothers in faith may not share this same understanding of welcome because of their theological convictions. Even so, embracing our tradition that believes there should be no force or coercion in matters of religion, these persons are fully welcome as part of our congregation as well.

Relating to the Larger Church on LGBTQ Inclusion

We recognize that our larger denominational body, the Church of the Brethren, continues to struggle to extend full welcome and inclusion to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) persons. It is clear that the 1983 Annual Conference statement *Human Sexuality from a Christian Perspective*, reaffirmed in 2011, does not reflect the convictions of the entirety of our denomination. The same is true with regards to the 2002 response to the query *Licensing/Ordination of Homosexual Persons to the Ministry*. While we agree with much that is said in these statements concerning the importance of a Christ-centered approach to sexuality and the need to seek justice for LGBTQ persons, we disagree with some of their conclusions.

As a congregation we desire to name, affirm, support, and bless the presence of God's love and power within LGBTQ individuals and their relationships. We lament our denomination and district's continued refusal to recognize the validity of same-sex covenantal relationships or allow congregations to call LGBTQ persons to be licensed and ordained.

We affirm that our sexuality is a gift from God that can be nurtured and treasured, or mistreated and abused. As such, it is important for the church to help one another discern how our sexuality might be expressed as a reflection of Divine love. We also affirm that abuse, force, and violation of trust have no place in sexual relationships. Despite our disagreement with certain parts of the above Annual Conference statements, we applaud the ways they seek to dispel misinformation, name instances of incomplete biblical interpretation, and promote continued conversation with regards to LGBTQ sexuality. In the spirit of these statements, as a welcoming and affirming congregation we seek to:

- be open and welcoming to all who seek community in the name of Jesus Christ;¹
- develop helpful and compassionate ministries with LGBTQ persons;²
- challenge openly the widespread fear, hatred, and harassment of LGBTQ persons;³
- advocate the rights of LGBTQ persons to jobs, housing, and legal justice;⁴
- be in conversation with persons of varied sexual orientations as sisters and brothers in Christ;⁵ and
- wrestle with our tension, truly listening to one another, disagreeing in love, avoiding unkindness toward those with whom we differ, and continuing to seek the mind of Christ together.⁶

Our decision to openly welcome and affirm LGBTQ persons comes after much individual and corporate discernment, and follows Annual Conference encouragement for “individuals, congregations and districts to continue deeper conversations concerning human sexuality outside of the query process.”⁷

Sexuality, which is meant to be an expression of love, joy, and unity, has all too often become a reason for brokenness, sadness, hatred, and violence. We seek to find healing and wholeness in the midst of our divided culture and denomination. We know that not all are of the same mind, even within our congregation. Yet our desire is to remain in fellowship despite our differences, while nevertheless standing with those who are rejected and marginalized. We believe this is the way of Jesus. When we find any individual or group within the congregation, district, or denomination to be in conflict with any other, we will show love rather than demand conformity or push for separation. Together we will work to draw closer to one another as we gather around Christ, our center.

(Adopted by unanimous consent, Richmond Church of the Brethren Congregational Meeting, 11/20/11)

1 2002 Annual Conference Response on Query: Licensing/Ordination of Homosexual Persons to the Ministry in the Church of the Brethren

2 Ibid

3 1983 Annual Conference Statement: Human Sexuality From a Christian Perspective

4 Ibid

5 2011 Standing Committee Report on Query: Language on Same Sex Covenantal Relationships

6 Ibid

7 Ibid