

Reflection Statements from Small Groups

Groups met for approximately six weeks, using a small group guide put together by our church to deepen our study and engagement with one another. In their final gathering, groups were asked to attempt to create a statement reflecting on how they understand a faithful way forward for our church, trying their best to engage these questions:

- *What have we learned through this year-long dialogue?*
- *What do we hope for as we listen for God's direction?*
- *What do we understand to be essential to Christian faith - what is core and central to the Christian story?*

Group 1:

We have learned to listen better, desiring to love others, accept them and let God work in their hearts and ours.

We hope for unity in our church family even when we disagree. May we always err on the side of grace.

The same Christ present at creation is the same Christ calling for confession and relationship with grace, mercy and love.

Group 2:

WHAT WE LEARNED

We've learned to ask questions and actually listen to responses without judgment. We've learned to calmly and thoughtfully engage difficult questions and difficult topics and conversations. We've learned that following Jesus looks different to different people, and we may understand scripture differently, but despite theological differences, we understand Jesus to be loving and saving.

We acknowledge the character and behavior described in Romans 1:26-32 does not seem to match the character and behavior of many LGBTQ people that we know, especially those who claim Christ as Lord and Savior. We agree on more than we disagree. We recognize our faith and commitment to Christ is not negatively impacted by LGBTQ believers in our community, and even in leadership--this doesn't cause our foundation to shift or us to stumble.

WHAT WE HOPE FOR

We hope for open hearts and minds, a unified church where our church family stays in this struggle with us. That despite differences of opinion and beliefs around this topic, that we can come together and grow FPC to be the most loving and Jesus-honoring community possible.

We hope for growth as a community into a better understanding of one another, moving forward in a way that's the least harmful, and most loving as possible.

We stand firm in the hope that nothing in all Creation can separate believers from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

WHAT WE UNDERSTAND TO BE ESSENTIAL

What is essential: the belief and desire to follow Jesus, to honor him in our lives, to try to love like He does. A respect for scripture and commitment to follow God's word.

The church is made up of sinners saved by Grace, called together by God to confess that Jesus Christ is our Lord. His grace is extended to all.

People are guided to Christ by love, by acceptance, by grace and shalom. We are called to embody these characteristics to love God, love God, help others love God.

Group 3:

What we've started to learn through this experience is how to listen without becoming extreme; how to stay in conversation and continue in dialogue with people without getting angry, defensive or storming out; how to face each other instead of avoiding each other; being willing to rest in the middle and to embrace gray. We want to encourage others in their relationship with God instead of placing stumbling blocks in their way, potentially leading some to give up their faith and relationship with God.

We hope to maintain an ongoing openness to different points of view that will keep our faith community in a place of continuing to listen. What if this became a part of our culture instead of just a temporary practice? We hope to both seek to understand different points of view and still support where session leads us. We pray for trust in the Lord and in the leadership of our faith community. We don't know where we're going to end up but we want to enjoy who we're with.

Clearly, the foundational creeds are essential and non-negotiable to the Christian faith, e.g. Apostles Creed, Nicene Creed. These are areas around which all Christians in all places and at all times can agree. As for how to live those out, we'd like to see: not judging one another; showing love to each other even when we disagree; and to be part of a church family instituted by God because we're called to be part of community of believers.

Addendum:

Recommendation to session: that any who would feel called to ordination or marriage in our community would be considered as a whole person and not as a category or label.

Our desire is that we go forward as a family and continue to invite the participation of the Holy Spirit in our church.

Psalm 19

¹⁴ Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable in your sight,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Group 4:

1. What have we learned: We can be uncertain and at different places and still talk with each other and respect each other. We can have a good time in this process. We can build fellowship and cross generations in these dialogues. We are considering more carefully who pays the price of indecision? We need all of each other; our differences are iron sharpening iron.
2. What do we hope for: Peace with transparency and justice. A united church. Stay focused on loving God, loving others and helping all love God. All people should be accepted into the space of the church. We still are divided on whether we hope for a change in the ordination/leadership/wedding policies. We hope we can hold the tension and love each other as a body of Christ.
3. What is essential?: We loved our dinners together and laughter. Oils. Every person is a child of God, we love and respect all. This topic IS essential as it excludes or welcomes people into the kingdom and as it typifies a whole host of things. The gospel is essential. We want to know how/where Jesus wants us to be. We want to be at a place where sexuality and gender are not a barrier or a platform, but are background to who we all are in Christ.

Group 5:

Our group has learned a tremendous amount from these discussions. The resources were selected with care to represent both sides of the issue.

We feel the LGBTQ is the latest of cultural changes the church must face. Each cultural shift since the time of Jesus has been significant. Bringing Gentiles into the church, bringing women into leadership positions, accepting divorced persons, Sabbath rest vs. breaking Sabbath, etc., have all gone before this current process to be accepted. They were no less important, disturbing or church splitting.

We were so in agreement that each facet of LGBTQ are not the same and definitely cannot be lumped into the same categories.

We feel we must move forward as a church together to navigate this change.

There are 4 levels of acceptance of the LGBTQ group:

1. Welcome in congregation. (all agreed no restrictions here)
2. Can they be members? (all agreed yes here)
3. Can they be in leadership? Yes, with new standards written for the positions, that would apply to all, not just one group or another.
4. Is the individual qualified from a spiritual perspective (internally); how will they be perceived by the congregation (externally)?

The most important issue is the unity of the brethren. That said, we must move forward asking the following questions:

1. At what point to have acceptance before alienating the congregation we are ministering to, and how do we discern?

“That search for love. We’re all searching for love—the plank in my eye...”

“It’s a basic human right to walk into our church and be accepted. That search for love”
NOT “we’re not going to love you unless you fit the mold....” Jesus didn’t ask for our qualifications

“If we were to run roughshod over somebody, that would not be following the will of God.

“Idolatry: Anything man made that keeps us from God. Man made constructs are the marriage ceremony, Sunday morning, Deacons....”

Our group said: Gluttony, greed and pride are on this same list (in Leviticus) as men having sex with men.

Everyone has friends or knows somebody who is gay. “Most of the gays that I know have left the church.”

2. How do we represent the will of God?
3. How do we represent Christ Jesus?

It was as agreed, each passage where homosexuality or the like is mentioned in the Bible must be examined thoroughly considering the culture and history at the time and the effect it had in each of these passages. It then must be applied to today.

Dr Mark Achtemeier, from our resources, summed it up nicely, We have to try to study each passage, considering all mentioned above, and try to really discern what the writer of the passages was trying to convey to the readers of the time and how does that apply it to today.

Additional notes from *76 Things Banned in Leviticus* from *Dave Does the Blog*:

“Leviticus is a funny book for modern Christians. It lays out the Law for the Israelites. But it’s largely ignored by modern Christians because it’s felt that Jesus replaced the Law (except where He didn’t) and that Paul said a lot of it didn’t apply (except for the parts that did). And for all of that, many are still willing to cite Leviticus for things that they think are sinful, while ignoring it for things they don’t.

In other words, people tend to cherry-pick which of the Levitical laws (or, for that matter, all of the Old Covenant, not to mention most of the Bible) they think still apply, and which don’t.

This cherry-picking is sometimes reasoned, and sometimes not. Sometimes it’s based on personal taste — I think that’s okay, so we can ignore that law. Everyone does that these days, so it must be fine. I think that’s icky, so we should cite it frequently as sinful. Sometimes it’s based on reasoning — e.g., comparing them to [the Greatest Commandments as Jesus laid them out](#) and seeing if they still seem to apply.”

Group 6:

What we have learned through this year-long dialogue.

We have much more unity than we realized. We don’t agree on all aspects of our Christian life in Christ, but we now understand each other better and have learned to care for and love each other.

What we hope for as we listen for God's direction.

Our hope for the future is that we live more openly about our differences and grow together as a body, particularly regarding our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. The dialogues in our group have opened us up to options we had not considered before. We hope for that kind of openness for our whole church. It will be important to listen to each other's stories and be willing to live with more grace and compassion in the cloudy and grey areas where we don't agree. Seeing the humanity of all people, listening to people's stories and sharing God's love for all of us should characterize our lives in Christ.

What we understand to be essential to the Christian faith- what is core and central to the Christian story.

- Acceptance
- Relationship
- Being Christ-centered
- Love
- Forgiveness
- Christ gave His life for us
- Living as much as we can like Christ, with the Holy Spirit's help, from His teachings and examples Living in community that helps us grow in Christ

Group 7:

We are In Agreement:

All people should be encouraged to attend and feel loved in our Christian community, regardless or their life choices.

We are all sinners.

All churches are flawed.

No sin is greater than any other sin.

Faith in Jesus is the most important tenet of being a Christian.

We should focus on the positive that each congregant can contribute.

FPC should be a safe environment for all followers and seekers be encouraged to grow in their faith.

We have all enjoyed the openness of this conversation.

We all hope we can find a way to stick it out and stick together.

We are Not in Agreement:

We do not agree on what needs to be called to accountability.

We do not agree on what constitutes sin.

Some feel that same-sex marriage is a sin and others do not.
We do not agree whether or not the the policy needs to be updated.

Note at 4/27/2019 - not every group had submitted a statement yet.