



The Office of the General Minister and President
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada

June 2012

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In fielding questions from Disciples, I am asked, “Where are we with respect to sexual orientation?” Since the question comes up frequently, I would like the Church to know how I answer it.

I respond, “Some faithful Disciples, in deep study of scripture and with much prayer, have come to the conclusion that sexual orientation is part of how each one of us is created by God. Other faithful Disciples, in deep study of scripture and with much prayer, have come to the conclusion that homosexuality is sin. What makes us *Disciples* is that at the Table of the Lord, people of both points of view – and everyone in between – are welcome.”

Followers of Jesus have always been diverse. Matthew, the tax collector, a servant of the Roman Empire, was among the twelve. So was Simon, the Zealot, working to overthrow the Roman Empire. Yet these two were known by one name: disciples. Disciples of Christ today still hold different perspectives on controversial issues. Yet “God’s covenant of love . . . binds us to God and to one another.” “Through baptism into Christ we . . . are made one.” (*Preamble to the Design.*)

Our confession of faith in Jesus Christ brings us into fellowship with one other. We value individual and congregational freedom of belief and conscience. We gather *with* our differences; united by and in Christ alone.

Among Disciples, a core manifestation of our unity with diversity has always been the open Table. Knowing that the Table is the Lord’s, we make room for whoever will come at Christ’s gracious invitation. **All are welcome.** Diverse though we may be, we, too, call ourselves by one name: Disciples. Our challenge (as individual brothers and sisters in Christ and as congregations) is to help each other feel welcome and also *safe* at the table of our Lord.

All tables of the church must be safe places, where respect for diversity among God’s children is honored. As self-governing ministries, in covenant with one another, our challenge is to make room for each other within one Church – even when we make different decisions on important matters. In the past, maintaining the respect and safety of the Table has challenged Disciples. In the era of slavery and abolition Disciples did not divide, but stayed at the common table. Today, the politicized and polarized character of the sexual orientation and equality debate again poses such challenges. ***This is the time to use our best table etiquette of entering into dialogue in love even in our diversity of opinion.*** This is the time for the church to show the world that wholeness wins out over fragmentation.

Approaching each other in love is especially difficult in matters at the core of our human identity. Human sexuality is not an “issue;” it’s who we are. It’s about all of us – including our friends and family members who are gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender – children of God with names and stories and a faith journey to recount.

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Along with the question, “where are we on this?” some are calling for the Church “to vote and take a clear position” – that is, “to decide” about how Disciples understand the Gospel call related to sexual orientation in our church. The truth is, in standard Disciples fashion, “the Church” already *is* deciding – all over the place – in congregations and regions and individual hearts. It’s just that, in keeping with our diversity, we are coming to *different* conclusions. This is an Ephesians 4 moment when we are called to “bear with one another in love.”

When people from across the life of the Church talk to me, I am always astonished to hear both conservative Disciples and liberal Disciples (and moderates, for that matter) share deep feelings of disenfranchisement. The two “sides” think the other either rejects the authority of Scripture or holds a legalistic interpretation of select passages. Each believes another is setting the agenda. In reality, I am convinced that we all are trying to be faithful to the Gospel as we understand it, and sometimes that feels like a lonely place.

As General Minister and President I continue to work for and pray for God’s justice - the day when no member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) feels unheard or rejected or treated like a “second class citizen” within the fellowship of the church because of their understanding of human sexuality or their sexual orientation.

In the meantime, Disciples, let us engage in our “best practice” of welcoming all to the Lord’s Table, making sure all are welcome and safe. Let us maintain and create church processes that allow individuals and congregations to live together *with* our different decisions.

At the Lord’s Table, God welcomes us to share in fellowship with the entire Body of Christ. At the Table we become Christ’s body for the world. Through the church, we have the opportunity to extend to others the grace of inclusion that God extends to us in our own search for faithful understanding and right action.

We are diverse communities, but all Disciples. We are many members, but one body of Christ. My prayer is that we can continue to cherish each other in Christian love even as we continue to live for awhile with the ambiguities of our different conclusions. May we make room for each other at the literal and metaphorical tables of the Church.

May we bear with one another in love.



Sharon E. Watkins
General Minister and President