

Introduction to Westminster Presbyterian Church's Welcome Statement February 2017

Written by Mike Bunch

On November 20, 2016, the Session of Westminster Presbyterian Church adopted the following statement of welcome:

Westminster Presbyterian Church welcomes all to participate fully in the life of the church. Jesus, in his life and teachings, acknowledged all persons as wonderfully made children of God, each equally worthy of God's unconditional love.

So, striving to follow Jesus, we welcome everyone, with affirmation and celebration, praying God will draw us into deeper relationship with each other and with Christ as we worship and serve together.

If you have known the pain of exclusion and discrimination in the church or in society, know that you are welcome here.

At Westminster, ordination of church officers and member weddings are celebrated as acts of the Holy Spirit at work in the church regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation.

While this welcome statement could easily stand on its own without further explanation, we believe it is best understood in the historical context in which it was formed. Providing that context is the purpose of this introduction.

Welcome to Westminster

Over thirty years ago, Westminster Presbyterian Church (WPC) adopted as its mission statement Micah 6:8, which may be summarized as "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." Long before this statement graced the cover of our weekly bulletins, it was the force behind ministry at WPC on all levels. This same force now empowers our interactions with the larger community around us and the way we welcome that community to WPC.

Background

The following is a summary of events leading up to the adoption of the welcome statement. A timeline is included in Appendix A.

At its September 2015 monthly meeting, the Session discussed a letter from two previous Session members regarding a welcome statement for WPC. The letter stated, "In particular, we feel that it should be clear that we do not exclude worshipers because of their sexual

orientation because such people are often marginalized. We feel that no one would wish to exclude worshipers at Westminster and our public face should make that clear.”

The letter came at a time when churches throughout this and other denominations were struggling with the issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. It was not the first time Westminster had addressed the issue, but it was the first time the issue had been presented in this manner.

A committee was formed¹ to draft such an inclusive welcome statement to present at the October Session meeting. The committee’s proposed statement is presented below:

At Westminster Presbyterian Church, we enthusiastically welcome all to join us on our faith journey. Too often people draw distinctions about others based on race, religious background, age, ability, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, or other characteristics. But Jesus, in his life and teachings, drew no such distinctions, acknowledging all persons as uniquely created children of God, each equally worthy of God's unconditional love. So, striving to walk in Jesus’s footsteps, we welcome all, with affirmation and celebration, to join us and to participate fully in the life of Westminster.

After some discussion, the Session concluded that the statement was problematic because it contained the phrase “participate fully in the life of Westminster.” The problem with such a statement was that as of October 15, 2015, not all members or potential members of WPC could be married at WPC as this church did not permit same-sex marriages at that time. Thus, some people were excluded from full participation.

With the motion to approve the welcome statement having failed, the Session agreed to address the root cause of the statement’s failure – the policy governing who may be married at Westminster Presbyterian Church. Thus began a season of discernment on the subject of Christian marriage.

A Season of Discernment

The season of discernment began in the fall of 2015. Staff collected background materials and placed them on the WPC website for the Session and congregation to study prayerfully. Those reading materials may still be found at www.wpcdurham.org/resources-for-study-and-reflection-marriage/.

A complete list of those documents is included in Appendix B.

¹ Welcome Statement Committee members: Sam Bryan, Mike Bunch, Holly Cullen, Alex Denson, Sarah Falkovic, Sally Keener, Barbara Rynerson, Jeremy Trantham, Chris Tuttle, and Doug Wellemeyer

Pastoral letter and response. In November 2015, WPC's senior pastor sent a pastoral letter to the congregation announcing the actions of the Session and the start of a season of discernment. He referenced the study materials mentioned above and sought input from the congregation. As responses came in, they were shared with the Session. In all, over 50 members of the congregation responded. While the responses varied widely in content, most were quite positive with regard to same-sex marriage.

Additional guidance. Long before the season of discernment began, there were events in the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) and in the nation at large that had a profound impact on WPC. In June 2014, The General Assembly of the PCUSA (its governing body) had approved by a vote of 429 to 175 sending out for presbytery approval a constitutional amendment to W-4.9001 of the *Book of Order* that would change the constitutional definition of marriage from "between a man and a woman" to "between two people, traditionally between a man and a woman." The full text of the amendment is presented below:

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the wellbeing of the entire human family. Marriage involves a unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman, to love and support each other for the rest of their lives. The sacrificial love that unites the couple sustains them as faithful and responsible members of the church and the wider community.

In civil law, marriage is a contract that recognizes the rights and obligations of the married couple in society. In the Reformed tradition, marriage is also a covenant in which God has an active part, and which the community of faith publicly witnesses and acknowledges.

On February 28, 2015, the New Hope Presbytery (the presbytery to which WPC belongs) voted by a 162 to 88 majority (with 2 abstentions) to ratify the amendment. By that time, a majority of presbyteries had ratified the amendment, making it official PCUSA policy.

On June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States, by a 5-4 majority, ruled that same-sex marriage in the United States is legal, removing the final impediment to churches performing same-sex marriages in all U.S. jurisdictions.

Session retreat. On March 19, 2016, the Session held a retreat to discuss all relevant materials, including those referenced above plus correspondence from members of the congregation. Session members met in small groups to discuss their own experiences and thoughts pertaining to homosexuality and same-sex marriage and then as a large group to share what they had discussed in their small groups. WPC's three ministers then shared their views with the Session. The time had come for Westminster Presbyterian Church to take a stand.

A New Policy

On April 19, 2016, the Session voted by a 12-1 majority to approve the following statement of policy:

The Marriage Discernment Committee moves that the Session approve the use of Westminster's facilities for weddings of two people of any gender, using the guidelines established in our church's Wedding Manual; and that the Session communicate its decision to the congregation in a pastoral letter.

Upon approval of this motion, the Session identified steps that would be necessary for its implementation. These included communication of the decision to the congregation, revision of the Wedding Manual, and the drafting of a new welcome statement. Therefore, the Wedding Committee was directed to bring a revised manual to the Session for review and approval, and WPC's senior pastor prepared a pastoral letter regarding the Session's decision. The Session also appointed a committee to draft a new welcome statement to reflect the new policy.

Pastoral letter. On April 21, 2016, a letter bearing the names of WPC's three pastors and all 13 members of the Session was sent to the congregation. That letter provided a brief review of the events leading up to the April 19 decision by the Session and encouraged the congregation to move forward together, ending with this statement:

We extend that same gratitude and outstretched hand to you. Know that we are committed to moving forward together. We firmly believe that it is in Christ that we find our true and deepest unity. We hope and pray that you will be in conversation with us, pastors and elders, as we seek faithfulness together. Part of being a healthy community is understanding that we are always wrestling, always being reformed by the Spirit of the Living God, who seeks us still.

Revision of the Wedding Manual. The Wedding Committee took the existing Wedding Manual and modified its language to be non-gender-specific. The manual and accompanying forms were presented to and approved by the Session on June 19, 2016. That manual is available for review in the church office.

A new welcome statement. The final step in the sequence was the drafting of a new welcome statement. The Session appointed a committee to draft the statement and placed no specific deadline on its delivery. The committee met several times, both in person and via e-mail, over a period of nearly six months. They reviewed the original statement from October 2015 as well as statements from other churches, including other denominations.

Of primary importance to the committee was that the statement acknowledge the change in the marriage policy in some manner without making that policy its main focus. Members also considered the language of some of the confessions of the Presbyterian Church, particularly those that address reconciliation, without singling out one or more historically disadvantaged

groups. In the end, the committee adopted a statement that was Christ-centered, unique to Westminster, and extremely positive and affirming. The placement of the reference to the policy on marriage below a horizontal line was meant to show that the policy was related to but not the sole driving force behind the welcome statement. The plan is for that statement to remain for a period of time and then be removed once the policy is widely and fully understood.

As noted in the opening paragraph of this introduction, the committee presented its welcome statement to the Session on November 20, 2016, and it was unanimously adopted.

Follow-Up

There are plans to make the welcome statement an integral part of WPC's communications with the congregation as well as with those outside the church. Staff and Session members are working on ways to incorporate the statement into the website homepage and other online destinations as well as in key written documents. The implementation of the communication plan is expected to be complete during 2017.

Appendix A: Timeline

Date	Event/Action
June 2014	The PCUSA approves a constitutional amendment allowing same-sex marriage, to be ratified by a majority of the 172 presbyteries.
February 2015	The constitutional amendment allowing same-sex marriage is approved by a majority of presbyteries, including New Hope.
June 2015	The U. S. Supreme Court declares same-sex marriage to be legal in the United States.
September 2015	WPC's Session receives a letter outlining reasons for an inclusive welcome statement and forms a committee to draft such a statement.
October 2015	WPC's Session rejects a welcome statement that includes the phrase "participate fully in the life of Westminster."
November 2015	A season of discernment on Christian marriage begins with a pastoral letter to the congregation. Background materials are posted on the WPC website.
December 2015 - February 2016	The congregation of WPC responds to the pastoral letter and background materials; the Session reviews responses.
March 2016	WPC's Session meets to consider all background materials, congregation responses, and personal positions on homosexuality and same-sex marriage.
April 2016	WPC's Session approves same-sex marriage at Westminster. A second pastoral letter goes out to the congregation explaining the action of the Session.
June 2016	The Wedding Committee revises the Wedding Manual in response to the April action of the Session regarding marriage at WPC. The Session approves the new manual.
June-November 2016	A welcome statement committee drafts a new welcome statement for WPC.
November 2016	WPC's Session approves the welcome statement.

Appendix B: Materials Posted on the WPC Website February 25, 2016

Resources on assumptions around our polity and reading Scripture together:

- [Our Challenging Way: Faithfulness, Sex, Ordination, and Marriage](#)
- [The Bible & Homosexuality – 15 Propositions](#)
- [Short Version of Reformed Guidelines for Interpreting Scripture](#)
- [Seven Guidelines for Interpreting Scripture](#)
- [Seeking to be Faithful Together](#)

Resources that frame relevant scholarship:

- [White Paper on Same-Gender Marriage](#)
- [The "Homosexuality" Debate: Two Streams of Biblical Interpretation](#)

Resources that argue one "side" or another:

- Matthew Vines – [The Gay Debate: The Bible & Homosexuality](#)
- Robert A. J. Gagnon – [The Bible and Homosexuality](#)

As we read and study and pray together, every member of the church is invited to write the Session a letter sharing what you feel is important for them to consider (email to marriage@wpcdurham.org or mail to 3639 Old Chapel Hill Rd, Durham, NC 27707, c/o Marriage Discernment by March 27). You may also request an in-person meeting with a pastor and an elder or two, which you can do by emailing the same address above.

We will compile all of the letters, emails, and notes from meetings with you for the Session to read. Listening to the congregation's best wisdom and discernment is important to us. Your voice matters.

**Westminster is grateful to [First Presbyterian Church of Raleigh](#) for compiling and sharing these resources.*