

## **Discerning PoP's Position on Welcoming and Affirming Gay People and Relationships**

When considering how Prince of Peace will respond to the pressing issues of the inclusion of gay people into Christian community it helps to distinguish between connected issues of *behavior* (welcoming or not welcoming) and *theology* (affirming or not affirming). The various combinations of these two elements create a kind of continuum that exists in the Church today.

### **Not Welcoming and Not Affirming**

These congregations tend to believe that homosexuality and homosexual behavior is sinful. They also tend to believe that homosexuality is a chosen orientation. Therefore gay people are not welcome into church fellowship. At best they are welcome so that they can be “healed” (turned into heterosexuals). Otherwise gay people stand condemned before God and the Church. Westboro Baptist Church is perhaps the most public and extreme example of this position.

### **Welcoming but Not Affirming**

These congregations may not be certain as to whether homosexuality is a choice or an inborn trait. If it is considered an inborn trait rather than a choice then often *being* gay is not a sin, but having gay sex is. However, because they know that all people are sinners these congregations choose to welcome gay people into the congregation at various levels. Some congregations welcome them as guests. Others permit them to become members. Some might even allow gay people to serve in minor capacities. Few would allow a gay person in a committed relationship to hold a position of leadership. Some of these congregations believe that an individual can be “healed” of this sexual identity and become heterosexual.

### **Welcoming but Uncertain**

Many congregations welcome all people but choose not to discuss the issue of homosexuality. They live by a kind of “don’t ask, don’t tell” tolerance and silently represent a diversity of opinion on the matter.

### **Welcoming and Affirming**

These congregations believe that homosexuality is an inborn trait in most instances, and that committed gay relationships are not sinful. They choose to hold all relationships to the same standards of love and fidelity. In other words they “affirm” gay people and their committed relationships. Therefore gay people are welcome and encouraged to participate in every level of ministry and leadership in the congregation.

## Where is Prince of Peace?

Officially Prince of Peace is in the “Welcoming but Not Affirming” category based on the last policy statement written by Pastor Mike Foss in May 2004 (See attached). I am not aware of our Board of Directors affirming any new policy statement overriding this last statement. Our current “Welcome Statement” clearly states our welcome position, but the policy statement is clear about our non-affirming stance on committed gay relationships. The congregation, however, is largely unaware of this policy statement and so I would say that functionally we are “Welcoming but Uncertain”.

## Where I'd Like to See us Go...and Why

As a congregation interested in pursuing diversity I believe that we should continue to be welcoming and affirming of people of diverse perspectives on this issue, both in our congregation at large and among our staff and lay leadership. That is certainly the case today as we have members, leaders and staff who disagree with our current policy statement. I would, however, advocate for a change in policy to becoming a “Welcoming and Affirming” congregation for three reasons:

First, I believe this position is *faithful*. Arguments predicated upon biblical passages condemning homosexuality simply don't stand the test of history.

- While the Bible never mandates slavery, it is clearly “pro-slavery” and was used to support slavery throughout history (eg. Ephesians 6:5-9)
- Women are clearly limited in their roles of leadership in the Church (eg. 1 Corinthians 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:12-14; 1 Corinthians 13:35)
- Divorce and re-marriage are clearly prohibited by Jesus (eg. Mark 10:10-12)

In other words, at one point in time many in the Church believed that it was faithful to enslave humans, oppress women and prohibit re-marriage because “the bible clearly says....” But do we believe that there was ever a time when the God who is revealed in Jesus approved of human enslavement and gender oppression? We now believe that it is *faithful* to fight against slavery, fight for gender equality and allow people to recover from broken and sometimes abusive relationships and commit to faithful love again. Based on this pattern, on my understanding of gender-orientation from a medical, social and psychological perspective, and the radical inclusivity of Jesus in the Gospels I believe that it is *faithful* to affirm gay people and their committed relationships.

Second, I believe this position is *just*. Affirming gay people and their committed relationships is an issue of justice. We are a people called to “do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.” We are a people called to follow the One whose radical inclusivity offended the sensibilities of the religious leadership of the day. To encourage or remain silent in the face of prejudice is both unfaithful and unjust. Such prejudice perpetuates bullying and systems which deny basic rights to gay people including marriage, adoption, and “next of kin” status for hospital visits and medical decisions. I believe that it is *just* to affirm gay people and their committed relationships.

Third, I believe that this position is *missional*. In the early Church Jewish Christians came to recognize the movement and gift of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles. This discernment of the

movement of God's Spirit was both shocking and contentious as the early Christian community wrestled with such radical inclusivity, and yet they trusted the Spirit's movement, welcomed and affirmed the Gentiles as brothers and sisters in Christ and witnessed the dramatic expansion of the Church. I believe we are witnessing a similar movement in the Church today as more and more of us discern the movement of the Spirit and seek to welcome and affirm our gay brothers and sisters.

In addition, it seems clear to me that like the issues of slavery, women's rights and remarriage, our society's perspective on the morality of homosexuality is shifting quickly and radically. A LifeWay research poll showed that when asked "Do you believe homosexual behavior is a sin?"

In 2011:

- 44% said it was sinful
- 43% said it was not
- 13% were unsure

When asked the same question just one year later:

- 37% said it was sinful
- 45% said that it was not
- 17% were unsure

[<http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2013/01/11/is-gay-behavior-a-sin-this-is-where-the-american-people-stand-on-the-morality-of-homosexuality/>]

A recent ABC News poll found that 80% of adults age 19-29 are in favor of same-sex marriage.

While the Church is not called to follow the whims of culture, when coupled with my belief that affirming gay people is both faithful and just, it also seems wise to acknowledge that it is also missional. Taking a stand against homosexuality is one of the many reasons that a growing number of Americans are not interested in the Church today, and it certainly keeps our gay brothers and sisters from feeling welcome, no matter what our welcome statement says. Gay people don't want to be merely tolerated; they long to be affirmed and included just as we all do, and they should be.

Because I believe that being Welcoming and Affirming is a *faithful, just* and *missional* position it is my recommendation that the Prince of Peace Board of Directors take the necessary steps to move toward this position. While it will require education, careful process, patience and diligence, I believe it is a journey worth taking.

What does this mean from a practical standpoint?

- With Board approval the Diversity and Inclusivity Team will continue to move Prince of Peace through a process of education, dialogue and listening.
- When the time seems right the Board would approve a new policy that Prince of Peace is both Welcoming and Affirming. This decision would be public. This would mean that discrimination against gay people at Prince of Peace in terms of their full involvement in

mission, ministry and leadership would not be tolerated. We would be fully open to calling a gay pastor. This would be an operational policy and would not in any way dictate what any member at Prince of Peace believes.

- Our pastors would, at their own discretion and conscience, officiate at same-sex marriages both on and off our campus. If and when the laws change regarding the legality of same-sex marriage we would again encourage our pastors to perform marriage ceremonies at their own discretion and conscience.
- Our teaching of both adults and students would acknowledge our policy and theological position while also acknowledging our current theological disagreement.