

Conversation Team: Final Report to the Session April 25, 2016

In October 2014, as the world and our PC (USA) church family were changing, the Session of Seneca Presbyterian Church began a process of discernment related to the potential full inclusion of LGBT persons in the life of our congregation. A motion was passed at the December 2014 meeting of the Session to appoint a seven person team charged with designing a process for conversation related to God's gift of human sexuality and how that gift speaks to changes in our culture, both secular and denominational. Emily Land and Marti Usher, currently serving elders, were appointed as co-sessional representatives. In February 2015, the Session appointed Bonnie Andruszka, Jerry Crabtree, Lewis Creel, Jim Kenworthy, and Natalie Schwartz as members of the team.

We began meeting in March 2015. Initial listening took place among ourselves and as we engaged members of the congregation in private conversations. In April 2015, we proposed a series of Talk/Listen/Learn sessions for late summer and early fall. Each session was designed to offer information about how Seneca Presbyterian Church initiated this process and how polity decisions are made in the PC (USA). Tony and Peggy Campolo were presented as persons of deep faith who still disagreed on the scriptural and theological response to LGBT persons within the Christian community. Opportunity was then given to the participants to respond with questions, concerns, the sharing of their own experiences, and their own understandings of the faithful Christian response to LGBT persons.

The Talk/Listen/Learn process was first engaged with the current members of the Session. Four opportunities were then planned for the congregation. Each was well attended. An additional session was needed to offer opportunity for all who wished to share in this process.

In our report to the Session, we noted:

In the course of these conversations, we learned that the membership and friends of SPC hold widely varied opinions on the acceptance of homosexuality and specifically same gender marriage. Almost everyone in the congregation knows at least one homosexual person. Many are members of their family, but also include friends, former students, and coworkers. The overwhelming majority of participants agree that we should be welcoming of all people to our church. Yet even with that desire for acceptance, many have concerns with allowing same sex marriage ceremonies at SPC. Still others state that we cannot "welcome someone to partial membership" in our church.

Because interest was expressed during these sessions for an opportunity to study scripture more fully, we engaged Dr. Peter Hobbie to lead us in Bible study. His sessions occurred on three consecutive Sunday afternoons (March 6, 13, and 20, 2016) and all were well attended, averaging 60 persons each.

In April 2016, we met to reflect on the experience with Dr. Hobbie and consider any further educational or listening opportunities. Looking back on the process that by then was over a year long, and recalling all that we had heard and experienced, we concurred that the congregation has responded well to this opportunity to bring faith to bear on a critical issue for our time. We also agreed that our current mission statement reflects what we believe to be true: we wish to be a church that welcomes all people into full and complete membership. We believe this includes all "benefits" of church membership, including same gender marriage.

Therefore we recommend the following statement to the Session:

Seneca Presbyterian Church reaffirms our mission statement – the Church for All People; Serving God through Serving Others – and considers it to be a broadly inclusive of all people and all facets of church membership.

Respectfully submitted:

The Conversation Team

Emily Land, Marti Usher: Ruling Elders

Bonnie Andruszka

Jerry Crabtree

Lewis Creel

Jim Kenworthy

Natalie Schwartz