Dear VPC members and friends,

Our PCUSA denomination took two actions regarding marriage at its General Assembly meeting in June 2014. First, it authorized clergy to perform same-sex weddings in states where it is legal. Second, it proposed a change to the denominational constitution by redefining marriage as between two persons. This changed definition must still be ratified by a majority of presbyteries.

Our Session did not go looking for this issue. The issue of ordination standards as it relates to gay and lesbian persons has been at the forefront of church controversy since the ‘70s. More recently the debate has shifted to same-sex marriage. The recent PCUSA decision has compelled our Session to respond with this pastoral letter.

We cannot address these matters without first confessing our personal failures as people of God. We stand under the truth that, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

We remain committed to our central mission of “becoming like Christ together for the world.” We enthusiastically embrace our core convictions of Jesus Christ as Lord, Scripture as our authority and everyone is called to follow Jesus.

As we address issues of same-sex marriage, we acknowledge the broad range of social issues facing the church today. When dealing with marriage, we must also address such issues as the epidemic of infidelity and divorce among heterosexual couples.

Our Session has spent the last year studying the marriage question anticipating this most recent General Assembly action. As much as our Session would like unanimity on the issue, we are not of one mind. A significant majority among us believe Scripture affirms marriage between one man and one woman. Session therefore embraces the historic teaching of the church on marriage. The reality that our Session doesn’t have full agreement on the marriage question reflects the diversity of views found among Christians today.
As elders, we agreed to abide by Biblical standards for leaders at VPC. Each elder and deacon who is ordained to ministry in our church is asked to affirm and abide by these standards. (We have attached these standards to this letter.)

This most recent General Assembly action saddens many on our Session. In the near term, we will continue our faithful witness to Jesus Christ as a PCUSA congregation. In the future we will explore new associations with churches who share our core convictions about ministry.

The General Assembly decisions will undoubtedly tear at the fabric of our unity in the body of Christ. We are reminded that our unity is in Christ rather than any particular perspective on these subjects. We are asking you to engage with us and to remain with the VPC body of believers as we seek God’s will together.

Pete spoke about the loss of civility in our culture in his June 1st sermon. (We have attached his sermon to this letter.) We endeavor to be a congregation that can talk about the social issues of our day with respect and dignity. We have witnessed how it is possible as a board of 18 elders to state our convictions while maintaining loving disagreement with one another.

We invite you to join the Session in a conversation on Sunday, July 13th at 6:30 p.m. We seek your counsel. We covet your prayers.

We strive to be a welcoming church for all people. We are grateful that you share this mission with us.

Sincerely in Christ’s service,

The Session of Vienna Presbyterian Church
Moderator, Pete James,
Clerk, Scott Slocum
BIBLICAL STANDARDS FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERS

“It is a true saying that if someone wants to be a church leader they have a good ambition. For a leader must be a good person whose life cannot be spoken against....Those who do well as leaders will be well regarded both by respect from others and also be developing their own confidence and bold trust in the Lord.” 1 Timothy 3:1-2a, 13

Leadership in the church is a responsibility and not a right. It is extended to those who come under the authority of the church’s teaching as expounded in the Bible and Book of Confessions. It has always been a demanding calling. Today, the gap between Christian and societal values makes this particularly challenging. As we serve Christ in leadership, we model what we really believe about our faith. Both our beliefs and our lifestyles are critical to the way we serve Christ and project Christian leadership.

The lack of clear moral guidelines in our society leaves many confused; this confusion extends often to church life. In an effort to bring some clarity, we have distilled some Biblical principles for the selection, training and development of those who serve the church as leaders. We want to be faithful to Biblical standards, yet avoid being judgmental. All of us have sinned, with failings both public and private. At the same time, believing that our leadership and lifestyles must demonstrate our beliefs, we should be able to say with Paul, “Follow me as I follow Christ.”

There are three principal passages in the New Testament that explicitly discuss the guidelines for Christian church leaders. They are: 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; and, 1 Peter 5:1-5. Christian life standards are described well in 2 Corinthians 6:3-10 and Ephesians 5:1-5, and instruction on Christian service is found at Ephesians 4:11-13, 15-16 and Philippians 2:1-4. The Christian leader should continually seek the Lord’s help in achieving the standards set forth in these passages. We have drawn from them the following guidelines. We encourage you to consider them, praying that God will honor your desire to model Christian beliefs and behaviors.

All who seek to lead in the Christian community will strive with the help of the Holy Spirit to exemplify the following Biblical standards of Christian living:

Spiritual Standards

- Jesus is Lord: In short, the Christian leader is one who desires Jesus Christ to be Lord in all areas of life
- Discipleship: The Christian leader requires a mature, vibrant and Christ-centered faith. That faith includes a personal grasp of basic Christian beliefs; an active, ongoing relationship with God, rooted in prayer; obedience to Scripture; and, a commitment to growth in love, holiness, service and fellowship. Christian leaders should not be recent converts.
- Servants: Christian leaders are to be the servants of others, and be willing to help those in need.
Christian Growth: Christian leaders make spiritual growth a continuing priority, reflected in Bible study, fellowship with other Christians, worship and involvement in Christian community.

Confession: Christian leaders are able to confess and repent of their sins. They lead the church in demonstrating humility and the need for God’s grace.

Scripture is our authority: Those who lead are teachers in the Christian community. They must teach with doctrine faithful to the Scriptures and the guidance of the Book of Confessions. They come under the authority of the Bible in their own lives.

Commitment to Local Church: Christian leaders at VPC are to be members of the congregation, regular in attendance of worship and faithful to the extra commitments their positions require.

Stewardship: Christian leaders are to have a growing commitment to progressive and disciplined giving, proportional to resources. They are to be generous in giving of their time, talents and financial resources.

Personal Standards

Integrity: The Christian leader shall be committed to the highest ethical standards in both personal and professional conduct.

Speech: Christian leaders speak the truth in love and are not quarrelsome. Their speech should reflect their commitment to Christ.

Self-Control: The Christian leader exercises self-control in speech and action and is free from substance abuse (alcohol, drugs and other dependencies).

Sexual Behavior: The Christian leader is committed to fidelity in the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, and chastity in singleness.

Distinctive Lifestyle: The Christian leader will demonstrate in lifestyle what is desirable in all believers, the fruit of the spirit: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Our leaders seek to illustrate a ministry of grace in their own lives.

Leadership Standards

Balance: The Christian leader makes an ongoing effort to balance quality relationships among family, occupation and church responsibilities.

Concern for Others: Christian leaders have a heart for seeing people come to know Christ and develop their Christian walk; they cultivate an ability to share their faith.

Commitment to Training Leaders: The Christian leader is committed to training others, encouraging them, and giving them opportunities to use their gifts.

I have read, understand and subscribe to the Biblical Standards for Christian Leaders as described above.

______________________________________________________________  __________
(Signature) (Date)
Today, we begin a sermon series on the Minor Prophets. We’re calling it “Minor Prophets-Major Message.” We’ll devote a summer’s worth of sermons to these 12 forgotten books at the end of the Old Testament. Even if you have a well-worn Bible, this section of Scripture is likely to be in untouched and in pristine condition. You’ve heard of Jonah and the whale, but I doubt you know anything about Nahum, Obadiah and Zephaniah. Don’t let this word minor fool you. It refers to length, not importance. There are five major or longer prophets and 12 minor or shorter prophets. These Minor Prophets are short enough to fit onto a single scroll. The intent this summer is to major on the minors.

Each Sunday, we’ll introduce a different Minor Prophet to you. We’ll preach on a representative passage from each prophet and invite you, in the coming week, to follow the reading schedule in our daily devotional. Since these books are anywhere from 21 verses to 14 chapters, your homework will be altogether manageable.

If you devote yourself to these Minor Prophets, it could shift your center of gravity. It could alter what you think about. It could change the trajectory of your life.

Hosea is a Biblical prophet who lived 2800 years ago. He was sent by God to call God’s people (Israel) back to their mission of sharing God’s love with the world.

Hosea opens his book with a word from the Lord. God directs Hosea to marry a prostitute named Gomer. Please don’t leak this story to Hollywood. They’ll turn it into a blockbuster HBO miniseries. I can see it now. A prophet marries a prostitute. It sizzles with possibilities.

There’s no record of any conversation between God and Hosea but I hear it. Say what? You want me to marry a prostitute? Really?

Hosea and Gomer have three children in quick succession. Their eldest son is named Jezreel whose name means “God plants.” God plants this city in the desert as an oasis, but subsequent kings commit horrible acts of violence there. It would be like calling a child Hiroshima or Auschwitz today. Their daughter’s name Lo-Ruhamah means “not loved” and their second son’s name Lo-Ammi means “not my people.” If you think there must be more to this story than meets the eye, you’re on to something.

It isn’t long before Hosea’s wife is back on the streets, plying her trade. When she becomes a slave to her pimp, God tells Hosea, “Go, show your love to your wife again, although she has played the harlot.” So, Hosea buys her back for 15 shekels of silver and 10 bushels of barley.
If you are thinking this whole story sounds rather paternalistic, well, it is paternalistic. In the 8th century BC, marriage was the exclusive domain of men. Men held all the cards where marriage is concerned. The marriage of Hosea and Gomer is a metaphor. Just as Hosea buys Gomer back, so God buys us back.

For some, this story of infidelity hits close to home. You have experienced firsthand the deleterious effects of what infidelity can do to marriage and family life.

You may remember Elizabeth Edwards, who was married to Senator John Edwards. He ran for president in 2008, but the campaign ended prematurely when news surfaced that he was having an affair with a campaign staff worker with whom he fathered a child. The news hit Elizabeth hard since her father was rumored to be a philanderer also. When she and John became serious, she told him, “I don’t need flowers or jewelry. I don’t care about vacations or a nice car. But I need you to be faithful.”

God tells his people, I need you to be faithful. Fortunately, God doesn’t offer us a contract. Most business deals are sealed with contracts. Business contracts are binding only so long as both parties agree to it. If one party breaks the contract, the deal is off the table.

Instead, what God offers people is something called a covenant. A covenant is comparable to the ties that bind parents and children together. If a child violates the terms of the covenant, a parent doesn’t say, “Well, that’s it. You’re out of the family.” There’s nothing a child can do to abrogate the terms of the covenant.

When the people of God mess up, God is faithful to the covenant. That’s how God can say to Israel, despite their infidelity, “I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness and you will know the Lord” (2:19-20). Even the names of their children will be reversed. Jezreel will be restored like one who is planted by God. Their daughter “not loved” will become “loved” and their son “not my people” will become “my people.”

God buys us back just as Hosea buys Gomer back. We read in 1st Peter, “It is not with perishable things such as gold or silver that you were redeemed from an empty way of life...but with the precious blood of Christ” (1:19).

Maybe you’ve drifted away from God or you’ve said or done something you now regret. Our sins don’t disqualify us from God’s love. The Bible calls it grace.

I’d like to widen the lens of Hosea to think with you about the community of the church. Hosea indicates that it’s possible for whole communities to lose their way.

Recently, I came across the original mission of Harvard University, one of the most revered institutions in America today. Harvard’s original mission statement
adopted in 1643 states: “Let every student be plainly instructed and earnestly pressed, to consider well [that] the main end of his life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ who is eternal life (John 17:3) and therefore to know Christ is the bottom as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning.”

Today’s mission of Harvard is strikingly different: “Harvard strives to create knowledge, to open the minds of students to that knowledge and to enrich students to take advantage of their educational opportunities.” I’d say there is considerable slippage between their original mission and their revised statement. The same is true in the Harvard University seal. The original seal or motto of Harvard University was “truth for Christ and the church.” Its current motto has eliminated any reference to Christ and the church. I’m not picking on Harvard. We could select most any church-related college in America today to observe a similar pattern.

Vienna Presbyterian has a mission: “Becoming like Christ together for the world.” We affirm three core beliefs: Jesus is Lord, Scripture is our authority and everyone is called to follow Jesus. It’s challenging to remain true to our mission in a time of rapid cultural change. Secularity is taking America by storm.

There are substantial issues facing church and culture right now. I could illustrate the point any number of ways, but let me do so by identifying the hot button issue in our day; that of same sex marriage. This issue is so controversial that the mere mention of it sends people into a highly reactive, emotional state.

Marriage is hardly an ancillary concern in Scripture. Genesis tells us that marriage is the first institution in human society. For my devotional reading today, I read the 2nd chapter of Malachi, one of the 12 Minor Prophets. Malachi addresses his concerns to husbands who break faith with the wife of their youth. In other words, Scripture is as concerned about issues related to heterosexual marriage, like infidelity and divorce, as it is to matters related to homosexual people.

That said, questions about marriage will be before the General Assembly of our PCUSA denomination this summer. It’s entirely possible that a few weeks from now our highest governing body will change the definition of marriage to “two persons.”

Our leadership body, the Session, has been anticipating this coming controversy. Over the past year, we have been engaged in a discernment process. Our goal, as we address any issue, is to discern God’s will for our church. To this end, we are considering three questions: What do we believe Scripture teaches about marriage? What will be our response if General Assembly redefines marriage this summer? How can we as a Christian community respect and live with each other despite our differences?

Let me address these three questions briefly. Since I don’t have time to deal with all three questions, let me express one overarching concern related to each question.
The first question concerns what Scripture teaches about marriage. As I listen to Christians of various persuasions debate these matters, I am struck by how often we default to matters of personal opinion and experience and how little time is given to what Scripture actually teaches about marriage. One of our three core beliefs is the authority of Scripture.

The second question concerns our denomination connection. The decision to redefine marriage will undoubtedly be agreeable to some of you and grieve others of you. Look, there are essentially three options for our church. 1. We can stay the course and continue to bear faithful witness within our denomination. 2. We can become minimalists about our denomination. We can support the PCUSA whenever possible and differentiate from it whenever necessary. As such, we can seek new affinity with churches who share our approach to ministry. 3. Or we could initiate a process to transfer to another denomination.

The third question has to do with how we maintain our connection with each other. Scripture has as much to say about how we live in community as it does our core convictions. I’m troubled about the precipitous loss of civility in our day. I want to serve a community that can talk about the social issues of our day with respect and civility. I have witnessed this past year how God has used graciousness among our elders on Session to lead the body of Christ.

Our covenant-keeping God will lead us through this turmoil as He has the past. There are any number of big issues facing our fellowship. Yes, it will be difficult. Yes, we will be tempted to check out. But no, this covenant-keeping God will not desert us. It’s no coincidence that we will sing “Great is Thy Faithfulness” to close our worship. God will keep this church. God will keep us.