

August 22, 2014

Dear Friends in Christ,

As your Session, we wish to keep you informed about the changing denominational landscape of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and some outcomes of the most recent General Assembly. Your elders have been committed to prayerfully considering what these changes will mean for our life together here at UPPC and appreciate your patience as we've discerned our unified response. As always, UPPC remains fully committed to following our Lord Jesus Christ. Our understanding of Scripture and God's Kingdom will remain consistent with the values and theology upon which our church was founded.

What happened at General Assembly?

This past June the General Assembly of the PC(USA) gathered in Detroit and made two significant decisions on the teaching and practice of marriage according to the Book of Order. First, the GA approved an Authoritative Interpretation (AI) that now permits PC(USA) pastors to conduct same-sex weddings, and allows sessions to approve the use of church property for such ceremonies. Secondly, the GA approved a proposed amendment to the Book of Order that would replace current language with a description of marriage as a relationship between "two people, traditionally a man and a woman."

While the AI goes into effect immediately, the proposed amendment re-defining marriage requires ratification by a majority of the presbyteries, a process that takes about one year. Both measures are designed to allow pastors and congregations to participate in same-sex weddings, in states where gay marriage is legal.

It is extremely important to understand that while the AI and the constitutional amendment alter the denomination's interpretation of marriage, they **do not require** any pastor to officiate or any session to authorize the use of church property for a marriage service with which they disagree. It remains up to pastors and each respective session to determine what is and is not appropriate for their congregation.

What is Session's response?

As the Session of UPPC, we are distressed with this action of the General Assembly, which effectively relegates sexuality and marriage to the subjective judgment of each individual pastor and each respective Session. The lack of a unifying theology within the PC(USA) is fracturing not only our connectional relationships with other PC(USA) congregations but the very crucial relationship between that of an individual pastor and Session should they disagree on this matter.

In our July Session meeting all three of our pastors expressed grief at the Assembly's action to permit same-sex marriages by pastors of the PC(USA) and to redefine marriage as a covenantal relationship between 'two people' rather than between a man and a woman. This action places the PC(USA) in irreconcilable conflict with both Scripture and its confessional tradition.

The UPPC Session elders are in agreement with the Pastoral team in the determination to not conduct same-sex marriages and not permit the use of UPPC property for same-sex marriages. We understand that not everyone will agree with our decision. We pray that those who disagree will continue to be engaged in the ministry and fellowship of our church. UPPC Session elders firmly believe that all people are valued and beloved creations of God, made in His image. Moreover, our Lord exhorts us to love and welcome all of His children into His church, if we are

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to live into that image: ***“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”***
(John 13:35, NRSV)

Moreover, we are especially dismayed at how the actions of the General Assembly require us to make determinations that may feed into very divisive culture wars in our broader society. As opposed to taking stances on those things we are against, we at UPPC take stances on what we are for; namely the proclamation of the gospel and the radical love and grace of Jesus Christ.

The relationship between UPPC and our denomination is multifaceted. It dates back more than half a century, and reflects God’s blessing on the denomination and on our church in particular. Sadly, our denomination has been plagued in recent years by conflicts over theology, mission and other issues. In response some congregations both nationally and within our presbytery have left the PC(USA) for other reformed bodies.

UPPC’s elders and leaders have discussed these realities for several years and in 2012 we appointed teams for information gathering and reflection. At that time we decided to remain within the PC(USA) and join the ‘Fellowship of Presbyterians.’ Joining the Fellowship has kept us engaged with like-minded congregations and leaders who can help provide vision and resources to carry out the kind of ministry to which UPPC has been called. It has also provided a theological identity for UPPC during a time of Senior Pastor transition so that we could focus our energies on the future mission and vision of our church. (For more on the Fellowship, please see this link: www.fellowship-pres.org.)

Where do we go from here?

While we have made a clear decision on the issue of same-sex marriage at UPPC we feel it important to stay in conversation together as a church. In the meantime, Paul directs us in Ephesians 4:3 to ***“make every effort to keep the unity of Spirit through the bond of peace.”*** These are anxious times for our church and our priority is to honor our core code values and retain our focus on the ministries and mission that Jesus has placed before us. In that spirit we ask you to:

1. Pray for those in leadership at UPPC. Pray for truth and the Lord’s leading to be recognized at the General Assembly.
2. Remain focused on your worship relationship with Jesus and the community that God has formed here at UPPC.
3. Be patient and trust your elders to prayerfully consider how they will respond to the changes that are at hand.

Our encouragement as we move forward into what God has in store for us is to dwell with the words of Philippians 4:8-9 ***“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”***

Please feel free to contact us with your questions or comments by sending a letter to the church with the notation “Attn: UPPC Session” or email directly to session@uppc.org. We welcome comments and will either respond directly to a question or prepare a response document that will be available at the church office.

In His Service,

The Session of University Place Presbyterian Church