

South Presbyterian Church, Rochester, New York
A Healing Overture: Admission of, and Apology for, Harms Done to the LGBTQ/Q
Members of the Presbyterian Church(USA), Family and Friends

December 15, 2015

Dear Friends,

In a letter to her congregation in early September, Diana Bell, Associate Pastor for Families & Children at First Presbyterian Church of San Anselmo, California came out publicly to her congregation. In her letter, she said the following about her use of the word *queer* to describe herself. I share this with Diana's permission. I ask that you consider Diana's courage and her words when you see *queer* used in the overture or elsewhere in describing ourselves as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning. From Diana:

"I am at the anniversary of an almost ten year struggle with accepting myself as "not straight" and I am pleased to finally not feel shame in claiming my truth. If you find the need to describe me with a label, I would prefer the term queer to lesbian or gay. It is my experience as part of a younger generation of queer people that the labels LGBT, which were and can still be useful and important for many, are now - for me - limiting and mired in politics and assumptions. Queer is a word that is being reclaimed to suggest a broad understanding of gender and sexual identities. I find comfort and power in the term because it is a way of resisting trying to fit into boxes/labels that do not fit. I guess I prefer my labels the way I prefer my God language: expansive and inclusive."

Thank you, Diana.

Please see the draft for this overture on the following pages. Check back at www.tamfs.org or contact ray@tamfs.org for updates or any questions you might have.

Peace,

Ray

A couple of notes:

- Please consider this overture for your Session and Presbytery. The body of the overture needs to remain the same, however the rationale can be changed and, if passed, still be considered a concurrence. A different "body section" would be considered a different overture and require a concurrence of its own.
- Additionally, since a Synod that approves an overture does not need a concurrence, we welcome this being proposed on a Synod level. Such a measure would assure that this overture or one like it will be on the docket for the 222nd Generally Assembly.

A Healing Overture

Admission of, and Apology for, Harms Done to the LGBTQ/Q Members of the Presbyterian Church(USA), Family and Friends

The Session of South Presbyterian Church, Rochester, New York calls for the Presbytery of Genesee Valley to overture the 222nd General Assembly (2016) to:

Affirm and witness these truths:

- we come to understand forgiveness, healing, mercy and reconciliation by God's actions through Jesus Christ's teachings and the Risen Christ in our midst;
- we are reconciled to God and one another by the forgiveness of our acts of sinfulness, through the Christ who is our peace and who breaks down the walls of hostility and division;
- further, we understand that ours is a faith and ministry of forgiveness, healing, mercy and reconciliation that requires admission of the harms we have done to one another;
- and that the fullness of our new life in Christ calls for a unity of Spirit, a sharing of gifts, and a valuing of all parts of the Body of Christ in the spirit of true forgiveness.

And we confess that our actions have fallen short of these truths in the marginalization of our sisters and brothers who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning (LGBTQ/Q), admitting:

- that harms have been done to this community by the denomination's participation in the creation of barriers to God's call to our sisters and brothers, based solely on their gender identity;
- that charges have been instigated with the intention of preventing qualified individuals called by God to serve based on their gender identity;
- that the Constitution of the PC(USA) has been erroneously used to support these charges, resulting in the use of the denomination's court system, in effect, being co-opted to discipline others for their gender identity; and
- that the denomination has participated in or been silent about challenging the destruction of the careers of faithful servants who identified as LGBTQ/Q.

Therefore, we direct that the Presbyterian Church (USA) consider this overture to:

- admit that it has been wrong in the way it has treated the Queer Community in the PC(USA);
- apologize for the teachings and actions that have created marginalization of our sisters and brothers, while by the same adding to the erroneous belief that people who identify as LGBTQ/Q should be considered unworthy to serve fully or be honored as family within and without the church;

- acknowledge that during this struggle we have often treated one another, regardless of our identity, in ways that did not reflect the presence of the Risen Christ in our midst; and that
- state publicly that the PC(USA), as a denomination, makes this statement as an act of forgiveness, healing, mercy and reconciliation. Further, that this admission and apology lifts up the constitutional changes that have been duly implemented to dismantle the lines that have divided us from one another and the ways in which we have been called to serve, including but not limited to Amendment 10-A; the Authoritative Interpretation on Marriage, and Amendment 14F.

Rationale:

There will be no chance for healing and ultimately reconciliation until the PC(USA) admits it was wrong and makes a statement of apology. There are many faithful sisters and brothers who have been estranged by the church because of its teachings, practices, and disciplinary actions towards ministers and others who identify as LGBTQ/Q. A statement such as the one suggested would have the affect of validating our legislative actions with our commitment to changing what has been exclusionary and wrong.

As one of the most constitutionally inclusive mainline denominations in the world, our voice has an impact beyond any borders we might imagine. Our voice of hope, love, joy, peace, justice and welcoming—the Good News—leads the way for global change and a beginning to the end to the violence of marginalization and discrimination around the world.

Calling the church to admit harms done and apologize to those it has wronged has an impact beyond the LGBTQ/Q community. All justice work is about our relationship with each other in this world. Any movement of an honest statement of apology and affirmation of our determination to herald the changes we have been called to make lifts up the entire denomination in a way that reaffirms who and whose we are. We are struggling to be who we are, in part, because we have yet to have the courage to speak out loud our convictions to be the Church of Jesus Christ in the world in ways that understand the risks God calls us to take and the resultant fear about which we need not be concerned. This is the hope in our calling: to be not afraid and to love one another as God loves us.

The theme of the 222nd General Assembly is *The Hope in Our Calling* - Ephesians 1:18

May it be so!