

April 2015

Dear FPC Family,

This past summer I wrote to you about the 221st General Assembly of our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which was meeting at the time and tackling a number of very difficult and controversial issues. As I pointed out then, the substance of the Assembly's work is hardly summarized in these few issues, but they do tend to receive the most attention, both from pundits and partisans within the church as well as from those outside.

As you may know, one of those issues, the debate over our understanding of marriage, has taken a significant turn this past month, as the Palisades Presbytery became the 86th – and decisive – presbytery nationwide to endorse Amendment 14-F, which changes the marriage section of our Directory for Worship to allow for the inclusion of same-sex couples in the covenant of marriage. Whereas the previous language defined marriage as a covenant between “one man and one woman,” the new language of 14-F says that it is a covenant between “two people, traditionally a man and a woman.” This new language officially becomes part of our church's constitution later this summer.

For some in our denomination, this change is a beautiful and wonderful thing, something to be celebrated and lifted up as evidence that God still speaks to the Church today, opening our eyes to things we hadn't yet understood and widening our perspective on the gospel's call to welcome all God's children. For others, the passage of this amendment is something to be grieved, a sign that we in the Church have lost our way and allowed voices other than God's to direct our decisions. Either way, the question for the Presbyterian Church now is: how do we move forward in ministry together?

I believe this is also the question for us here at FPC Statesboro – and not only in times of controversy, but always. How can we move our church forward in answering the call God has placed on our lives? How can we better love God and neighbor in our community, sharing the good news with all in word and deed? And what does the covenant of marriage, which is so beautiful and holy to us all, have to do with this basic call to know, love, and serve God and neighbor? Should our church respond in some way?

I will be working with the Session to begin addressing these and other questions as we move forward together in ministry. We ought not delay, but we need not rush either. It is important to note that Amendment 14-F explicitly preserves the Spirit-led right of every pastor to determine which weddings to officiate, as well as the Spirit-led right of every Session to determine which weddings will be celebrated on church property. And of course, it is not insignificant that same-sex marriage is not at this time legal in the state of Georgia.

But let me say, lastly, that we ought not to shirk our responsibility to have an open and honest dialogue about these things simply because the law of our state has not yet forced us to confront the issue. This would be unwise, first of all, because, with the Supreme Court

set to weigh in on same-sex marriage later this summer, it would seem that the days of ignoring the issue are definitely numbered. Secondly, though – and more importantly – it would be unfaithful to God and neighbor to refuse to have a conversation about something that affects the lives of so many of God’s beloved children. I want you all to know that my door continues to be open to any of you, at any time, who would like to share your thoughts with me and begin that conversation.

I believe our church, FPC, can truly be a model for others, both within and outside the Church, of how to have such conversations productively. We are not of one mind on many things, but we love each other, and God in Christ, well. Put differently, we may not be of one *mind* all the time, but we are blessed to be of one *heart*. Let’s begin thinking and praying in these terms right away: *Lord, teach us to love you, and each other, more than our various opinions. As the hymn says, Bind us together, Lord. Bind us together...*

Peace to you all,

Dan