

## **A Description of the Need for a Resolution**

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) people have suffered, often most egregiously at the hands of the church. This suffering has come as a result of outright violence in word and deed and, perhaps just as damaging, through silence in the face such injustice. As a denomination that proclaims itself “a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world” the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) must accept a special responsibility in actively finding ways to bring wholeness and offer healing, in particular to those whom the church has had a hand in harming, as well as to those whom the church has failed to stand beside in the face of the harm perpetrated by others.

Unfortunately, our denomination—which has officially engaged in a process of discernment with respect to this issue since 1997, achieving mixed results and no definitive statement—continues to have difficulty finding its voice when it comes to the inclusion of LGBTIQ people in the life and ministry of the church. Because of the congregational polity that characterizes the organization of our denomination’s common life, many have argued that the CCDOC will never speak with one voice about extending hospitality and affirmation to our LGBTIQ sisters and brothers.

Given the nature of that denominational structure, leaders (the General and Regional Ministries, clergy, and laity) among the CCDOC occupy a crucial role not only in reflecting denominational self-understanding, but in helping to shape it. The pastoral role of ministry requires a willingness to stand out front and point the way forward in the presence of divided convictions about which way is more faithful. No one denies that a prophetic stance will be difficult; if it were easy, it would be neither prophetic nor necessary.

Moreover, a prophetic voice has been found in recent times among Disciples, a voice to call us beyond our division and into a more just and equitable future.

At the height of civil unrest in the wake of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., when the country remained violently divided on the issue of race, Disciples stood up and spoke with a clear voice at the International Convention of Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) in 1968 “to address the sin of racism through resolutions and direct action.” In 1973, when only 4% of the of professional church workers and 9% of seminarians were women, and congregations were divided over whether women should be allowed in ministry, the General Assembly in Cincinnati, Ohio found its voice and passed resolutions urgently seeking to address the inequities of gender discrimination posed by excluding women from serving the church in the same capacity as men.

The important thing to note in these two examples is the extent to which Disciples made it a priority to help shape the church’s thinking on a General level, prior to any consensus on the Regional or congregational level. Knowing the potential fallout from taking controversial stands on race and gender, the General Church spoke to a better version of ourselves in which justice trumps inequity, in which hospitality surpasses exclusion, and in which holy courage eclipses fear. Despite the traditional theological understanding among some, underwritten by Scriptural interpretation—that races ought not to mix and that women ought to remain silent in the church—Disciples embraced a hermeneutic that opened itself up to God’s ability to do a new thing among God’s people.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is in need of such a voice today to speak courageously against the exclusion of LGBTIQ people from full participation in the life and ministry of the church.

However, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has taken shape over the last two hundred years with a particular ecclesiological bias toward the notion that ministry is a function of baptism and not ordination. Consequently, any progress toward a realization of our identity as “a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world” that welcomes “all to the Lord’s table” will necessarily derive a great deal of its energy and authority from people who express their passion

without benefit of institutional sanction. If things are going to change in our denomination in a way that offers a more expansive welcome to those who have been forced to the margins, it will come as a result of committed lay and clergy voices joining together to speak about the demands of justice and the possibilities of the grace signaled by the coming reign of God.

The question that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) will continue to contend with is the extent to which it can claim to be “a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world” that welcomes “all to the Lord’s table,” when in practice it defends or is silent in the face of a brokenness that excludes people from that table.

There are many Disciples who believe that we need to take positive action to communicate the need for a broader sense of the reach of hospitality, to acknowledge just how we can live out our identity as a people of welcome and grace. Therefore, it seems fitting to offer a resolution that would allow the General Assembly to speak a word to the church about what it means to welcome all to full participation in the life and ministry of the church.

## **FAQ**

**Q:** Doesn’t our congregational polity prevent the General Assembly from speaking on behalf of the church when there is no consensus? In other words, wouldn’t it be a lie for the General Assembly to pass a resolution calling us to be a people of welcome and grace to all people—regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity—when a majority of Disciples congregations have not made a public statement to this effect?

**A:** Sense-of-the-Assembly Resolutions do not just try to articulate matters of theological consensus—which is to say, speak only on behalf of the church where there is already some clear agreement. A large part of the function of Sense-of-the-Assembly Resolutions is to speak a prophetic word back to the church, which has failed to articulate a theological position consonant with the faith it otherwise

professes—in this case about justice, hospitality, and grace extended without regard to factors some consider disqualifying. In other words, Sense-of-the-Assembly Resolutions seek not just to summarize what everybody already knows and believes, but to help us creatively imagine the kind of world made possible by God’s unfolding reign.

Is it binding? No. It is intended to be prophetic—both for internal and external consumption. That is to say, it cannot be imposed on a congregation from without.

**Q:** Wouldn’t a resolution of this nature just be a small group at General Assembly imposing a theological position on everyone else?

**A:** Again, a resolution of this nature isn’t meant to be a practical description of what every congregation already believes. Instead, it’s meant to be aspirational—that is, it’s meant to hold in front of us a vision of God’s reign of justice, grace, and hospitality toward which we are working—not at which we’ve already arrived.

Should the General Assembly have waited to proclaim our understanding of ourselves as anti-racist or as in favor of women in ministry, until the church had already reached consensus on those issues? If that were the case, the function of Sense-of-the-Assembly resolutions would be merely reportorial—perhaps an important, but by no means courageous function.

**Q:** But aren’t Sense-of-the-Assembly resolutions inherently divisive, since they ask us to cast an up or down vote? Isn’t there a better method for coming to consensus on controversial issues?

**A:** Disciples have struggled with this question for years. The fear is that the “losing” side will be hurt, perhaps enough to leave the denomination.

What this fails to take into account in a case like the exclusion of

LGBTIQ people from full participation in the life and ministry of the church is that there already is (and always has been) a “losing” side in this question; only, ignoring that reality is much easier, since historically minority groups have never had the power to make the cost-benefit analysis work in their favor.

In this case, concern about division has historically been calculated with the concerns of pro-exclusive forces as the determining factor (e.g., “If we do this, they might leave.”). Unfortunately, however, the church has already been voting on “winners” and “losers,” but—it could be argued by the “losing” side—more on the basis of consequentialist calculations about which decision will make the fewest people angry, than on the basis of the theological integrity of the decision. As to the question about whether there is a better, less divisive way to make difficult decisions than Sense-of-the-Assembly resolutions, the answer seems to be: “If there is, we haven’t figured it out—or in the case of the Discernment Process, we haven’t figured out how to get enough people interested in it to commit to it.”

**Q:** But wouldn’t a resolution prove unnecessarily divisive? Won’t more conservative congregations leave if something like this passes? Don’t we have a responsibility to try to preserve unity?

**A:** A resolution wouldn’t be divisive; it’s the new reality that it represents that is divisive. That people are excluded from full participation in the life and ministry of the church because God created them a particular way, and that there are people who would champion this exclusion, is what is ultimately divisive.

Will it prompt some congregations to leave? If passed, a resolution like this might very well be given as the reason for some congregations to walk away from fellowship. Practically speaking, however, if something like this resolution doesn’t pass, we also need to consider just how many more people will leave, what they take to be, an unjust and exclusive denomination—and perhaps, just as importantly, how many people will never walk through the doors of a church that they consider unwelcoming.

**Q:** Don't we have a responsibility to try to preserve unity?

**A:** Unity requires perseverance through the inevitable pain that comes with living in covenant with another. However, a unity achieved at the expense of what is right and true isn't unity at all—it is merely uniformity. That doesn't mean that we press every issue to the breaking point of our communal commitments. But it does mean that a unity that depends for its existence on the church looking past injustice is a unity that those people who love Jesus should have no investment in preserving.

**Q:** Is it the right time? Will it pass?

**A:** The short answer is that nobody knows. Indications are pretty good that a resolution, well-drafted, will find a favorable hearing in 2013. But is it possible to guarantee its passage? No. Therefore, we must be circumspect about this decision.

However, again, the question we must continue to ask is “How many people and how much credibility will we lose if we don't do what we know to be the right thing?”

Will it be acceptable to those who care about this issue to say at some point, “We were waiting for a better time to do the right thing?”