

Grant Park Church

Why We're a Welcoming and Affirming Congregation

Grant Park Church strives to be a welcoming and hospitable community. Whether you're a visitor walking through our doors for the first time, a regular attendee participating in our worship service, or a long-time member joining a committee, our prayer is that you feel welcomed, loved, and valued for who you are and the gifts you bring to our community. This spirit of active inclusion has long been a part of who we are. We believe that strength is found in unity, not uniformity. We love the differences that make us all unique children of God, and we hope that our church is a place where you feel comfortable being you, whoever you are.

Likewise, we've long been committed to emphasizing the freedom we've been given through Christ – freedom “to engage with God in a variety of ways, to inquire, to learn, to wrestle with difficult questions, and to hold diverse opinions.”¹ To truly be a community where every voice is heard requires patience and the willingness to listen to one another. It's only natural, then, that we would welcome the testimony of all who walk through our doors, including those who identify as LGBTQ+.

As the book of Acts narrates, the first Christians were excited about spreading the good news of Jesus Christ and were actively proclaiming what God had done in Christ. Both Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) were drawn to this message, and the Spirit was working faster than these first Christians were able to keep up with. In Acts 10, God tells the apostle Peter to visit a Gentile named Cornelius in his home, even though it was “unlawful for a Jew to associate or visit with a Gentile” (Acts 10:28). When he gets there, Peter says, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:35). He then shares the Gospel with Cornelius and his household. “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The [Jewish believers] were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.... Then Peter said, ‘Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’” (Acts 10:44–47).

Just as Peter saw the Holy Spirit fall on Cornelius and his household, so we, as a community, have seen the Holy Spirit among us, in those of us who identify as LGBTQ+. Scripture encourages us to

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listen to the Holy Spirit in our midst, and to discern, as a community, what the Spirit is calling us to.

Early in 2017, we began discerning how we might best welcome and honor our LGBTQ+ siblings in Christ, recognizing that many LGBTQ+ Christians have been hurt by churches in the past. We wanted to make it clear to them that we were a safe and accepting Christian community. During this process, we learned of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists (AWAB), an organization that aims to “create and support a community of churches, organizations and individuals committed to the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons in the full life and mission of Baptist churches.” In July 2017, our church formed a committee to further investigate this organization. After several meetings, the committee unanimously recommended joining AWAB. Following a special Sunday service to discuss AWAB, hear from the committee, and ask questions, the congregation unanimously voted to join AWAB.

While our congregation unanimously affirmed this decision, we recognize that many Christians question how this commitment remains consistent with our commitment to Scripture as “a written witness to God’s revelation,”² or, to quote our denomination, American Baptist Churches USA, “the divinely-inspired word of God,” which “reveals our faith and its mandated practice.”³ Doesn’t the Bible condemn expressions of sexuality that fall outside the bounds of heterosexual marriage?

This is an important question. The truth is, the Bible doesn’t offer a consistent, detailed picture of what sex and marriage are supposed to look like. From kings with dozens and even hundreds of wives, to a Levitical law that reduces women to property, to the teachings of Jesus and Paul that encourage singleness over marriage, the Bible describes many different patterns.

There are a number of standard passages that some take to condemn our LGBTQ+ siblings, but it is not immediately evident how these, taken in their context, apply to us. Some are part of the intricate, often opaque, Levitical law given to the Israelites in the desert, most of which no Christians today follow. And the passages in the New Testament use obscure Greek words that even the best

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scholars are unsure of how to translate. For a helpful treatment of these passages, and sexuality in the Bible more generally, we recommend reading [this article](#) by Walter Wink.

The fact that the Bible doesn't offer an explicit sexual ethic is not in itself a problem. Christians are not to read the Bible as a rule book, but as a witness to God's saving work in history, beginning with the people of Israel in the Old Testament (but even then, overflowing beyond Israel's borders), culminating in the coming of Jesus Christ, fully human and fully God, and expanding through the Holy Spirit to include the Gentiles. Scripture shows us how God works in and with people, and thus helps us understand how God is working today. Scripture shouldn't limit the work of the Spirit among us, but should instead give us eyes to see and ears to hear the new work God is doing in our midst. In the book of Acts, even after Peter's experience at Cornelius's house, many church leaders remained unwilling to fully welcome Gentiles into the church. After all, their scriptures (the Old Testament) explicitly mandated circumcision and the keeping of Mosaic law as prerequisites for fellowship in the faith community. At a gathering of apostles and elders, Peter said, "God, who knows the human heart, testified to [these Gentiles] by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us, and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us" (Acts 15:8–9). Following the testimony of Peter – along with the missionaries Paul and Barnabas – the church leaders unanimously concluded that "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" not to discriminate between Jewish and Gentile Christians, not to demand that the Gentiles take on Jewish practices, and thus not to let the letter of the law impede the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28).

As a community that values scripture and seeks to follow the example of these early Christians, we recognize that God has given the Holy Spirit to our siblings in Christ who identify as LGBTQ+, something made evident to us by their fruits. We see the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – in our members, whether they identify as LGBTQ+ or not.

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In the book of Ephesians, Paul speaks of God's reconciling Jews and Gentiles through Christ. He says that Christ "has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body" (2:14–16). Just as God was actively breaking down the walls in the early church, so we see God breaking down walls of division between straight, cisgendered Christians and LGBTQ+ Christians.

We thank God for the Spirit's leading, and for the many gifts we've been given through our LGBTQ+ siblings. We have been made one in Christ. Thanks be to God!

Footnotes

1. <https://www.grantparkchurch.com/about/>
2. <https://www.grantparkchurch.com/beliefs/>
3. http://www.abc-usa.org/what_we_believe/the-bible/