

# A Taftsville Chapel Statement of Hospitality regarding Gender, Marriage, and Sexuality

*Proposed as an explanation and guide by Steve McCloskey, Pastor of Taftsville Chapel.*

At **Taftsville Chapel Mennonite Fellowship** we believe the proclamation that Jesus Christ offers “**glad tidings of great joy which shall be for all people**”<sup>1</sup> and that the promises of Christ are available to all who seek him with sincere faith:

**“Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”**<sup>2</sup>

In following the Spirit and example of our Lord, we do not wish to impose unnecessary burdens and man-made obligations upon others that would be an obstacle to experiencing the love and grace of God that we ourselves have encountered in Christ.<sup>3</sup>

We realize—and the New Testament testifies—that since the earliest days of the Church, there have been periods of debate about the tensions between the good news of the gospel of grace being joyfully proclaimed to *all* (without exception) and the implications of the gospel calling *all* to repentance into a new, radical and holy life in Christ<sup>4</sup>.

In recent history, we grieve the ways that these tensions have caused suspicions and unnecessary conflicts within churches surrounding differences regarding: gender, race, ethnicity, abilities and disabilities, immigration status, economic circumstances, sexual orientation, and marital status. In the interest of simplicity, our church wishes to express our statement of general inclusivity and hospitality to all persons grounded in the gospel of Christ and echoed in the words of Paul, the apostle, in his words to the Galatians:

**“There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”**<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:10

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 11:28-30, *New Revised Standard Version*

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 23:4, Galatians 5:1, Acts 15:10-11, Micah 6:8

<sup>4</sup> One example of such a debate is recounted in Acts 15.

<sup>5</sup> Galatians 3:28, *New Revised Standard Version*

Of particular sensitivity in recent decades has been debate among churches about gender, sexuality, and marriage. For these reasons, our church discerns the importance of providing clarity among one another and to those outside our church who are curious about our convictions on these matters.

## **Gifts and Calling and Ministry**

We believe that God calls and equips persons into a variety of tasks for ministry without gender-based limitations<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, we read certain verses in the New Testament that would have constrained women's ability to speak or to have equal standing with men in leadership roles in the past as contextually-based within a culture that had not fully appreciated the implications of the gospel<sup>7</sup>.

In 1988, Taftsville Chapel Mennonite Fellowship discerned the lead of God to call, license, and ordain Martha “Marty” Kolb to become the first woman to serve as a pastor in Franconia Mennonite Conference (now known as Mosaic Mennonite Conference). Marty herself overcame difficulties and doubts within herself and external challenges from others to hope of a time in which gender would no longer be a barrier to ministry:

**“My dream would be that the day would come when gender would not be an issue when calling pastoral leadership. That’s not to say that gender is not important. It’s only asking that it would not be used for excluding some and making others eligible. I would wish that the church could get to the point of calling forth the giftedness in all persons and utilizing them wherever the gifts can be best used.”<sup>8</sup>**

Today, in the spirit of Marty’s dream, we continue to welcome people regardless of gender to serve in a variety of leadership roles and gifts within our church.

## **Clothing, Names, and Pronouns**

We recognize that many— if not most— of the expectations surrounding gender are the product of human culture (i.e. the world) rather than the Word of God. In light of this, we seek to respect and accept persons’ self-expressions in godly ways that may not conform to the

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<sup>6</sup> Acts 2:17-18, Romans 16

<sup>7</sup> Examples include: 1 Timothy 2:5-15, 1 Corinthians 14:34-36

<sup>8</sup> Miller, Keith Graber. *Gospel Herald: The weekly publication of the Mennonite Church*. “Marty Kolb: struggling for a niche”. August 4, 1987

patterns of this world<sup>9</sup> or societal expectations of gender in areas of dress and clothing<sup>10</sup>, self-understanding, accessories, and names and pronouns<sup>11</sup>. We uphold the dignity of the image of God in each person as they were created, and we recognize that the image of God is reflected in bodies of a variety of colors, shapes, sizes, abilities, and gender-expressions<sup>12</sup>. While we encourage humility and modesty in outward expression in the context of our gatherings and worship services, we simultaneously honor and uphold a diversity of gifts and celebratory ways we can adorn our bodies in which each individual reflects the creativity of our Creator<sup>13</sup>.

We bear witness to the image of God revealed in male and female persons—and therefore understand that the image of divinity is not limited to one particular gender or sex<sup>14</sup>. We affirm that the bodies of both female and male humans were declared “very good” and that both femininity and masculinity represent aspects of the living God<sup>15</sup>. We also embrace our fellow humans created in the image of God who the Lord Jesus spoke of as having atypical reproductive organs and gender-experiences either because they were born this way, made this way by others, or chose to be this way when he said:

**“For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.”<sup>16</sup>**

Just as our Creator is revealed with both masculine and feminine characteristics<sup>17</sup>, we accept that our fellow humans reflect these qualities in a variety of ways with elements of masculinity and femininity not limited by anatomy<sup>18</sup>.

In this spirit, and as an offer of general guidance to one another, we seek to honor the names and pronouns with which each person attending our church identifies themselves with<sup>19</sup>. We

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<sup>9</sup> Romans 12:2

<sup>10</sup> Numbers 6:2-5, 1 Corinthians 11:13-17

<sup>11</sup> Revelations 2:17

<sup>12</sup> Revelation 7:9, 1 Corinthians 12:4-31

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 23:25-28, 1 Timothy 2:8-10, Colossians 3:12-14

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 1:26-27. For the purposes of this document, when we refer to “**sex**” we are generally referring to the anatomical categories of male, female, and intersex bodies. When we refer to “**gender**” we are generally referring to human self-expressions and self-understandings that are shaped by a composite of elements on a spectrum of “femininity” to “masculinity” which can be distinguished from anatomy.

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 1:27, Genesis 1:31

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 19:12, *New Revised Standard Version*

<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 66:13, Isaiah 49:15, Hosea 13:8, Matthew 23:37, Psalm 103:13, Deuteronomy 31:6

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 25:27-28, Genesis 29:17

<sup>19</sup> The topic of name-changes and pronoun changes has been a debate among some Christians. We encourage, as a general rule, what has been called “pronoun hospitality”; accommodating individuals’

worship a God who has given individuals new names and new identities across time<sup>20</sup>, and we endeavor to accommodate new names among those attending our church in keeping with the command of our Lord:

**“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”<sup>21</sup>**

Just as we ask one another to kindly honor names among us, we ask for grace for one another as we learn to know how each person would like to be called and embrace new names among those who gather with us— we may forget or make mistakes on occasion<sup>22</sup>.

### **Singleness, Marriage, and Sexual Integrity**

Taftsville Chapel welcomes families, people who are single, and those who are married to join us in seeking and worshipping God. We support the flourishing of all who fellowship with us—whether in singleness or marriage<sup>23</sup>. We understand and accept the historic Christian ethic that calls us to sexual chastity<sup>24</sup>—reserving ourselves and our bodies for consensual sexual intimacy in marriage<sup>25</sup>. This is consistent with the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995) which says: **“According to Scripture, right sexual union takes place only within the marriage relationship”<sup>26</sup>**. Additionally, Taftsville Chapel acknowledges that in our understanding of marriage, we embrace the declaration of the New Testament that in Christ **“there is no longer male and female”** (from Galatians 3:28). This implies that the historic expectation of gender-complementarity is not an essential feature to a marriage covenant that is pleasing to God<sup>27</sup>.

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self-requested pronouns and also being gracious with one another to those who misspeak when referring to others. An argument that weighs different considerations surrounding the debate for “pronoun hospitality” is presented by Preston Sprinkle in Chapter 12 of the book *Embodied* (2021).

<sup>20</sup> Genesis 17:5, Genesis 32:15, Genesis 32:27-28, Isaiah 62:2, Matthew 16:17-18

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 7:12, *New Revised Standard Version*

<sup>22</sup> In the book *On Not Judging a Book by Its Cover*, author Mx Nathan Tamar Pautz writes:

“I dream of a world where pronouns are self-chosen, where every person's gender identity is acknowledged without necessitating physical transition, where fashion is not defined by gender, and where a book is not judged by its cover.”

<sup>23</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:8-9, Proverbs 18:22

<sup>24</sup> Ephesians 5:3

<sup>25</sup> Hebrews 13:4

<sup>26</sup> Article 19 of the *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective* (1995) where this sentence is found can be accessed here:

<https://www.mennoniteusa.org/who-are-mennonites/what-we-believe/confession-of-faith/marriage/>

<sup>27</sup> We are aware that Article 19 of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995) states: “We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life.” While we recognize that this sentence was informed by scripture in its writing, we note that this sentence is found

We recognize that for much of history leading up to the present, many of our fellow Christians have felt unnaturally constrained to either choose between a life of isolation (not only as celibate, but feeling a need to hide themselves and their authentic romantic longings) or a marriage that was incongruent with their genuine self-understanding and sexual orientation. We believe that in light of biblical silence on the topic of same-sex marriage<sup>28</sup>, Christ has granted his Church the authority to bless and affirm the consecration of marriages, including loving and faithful relationships between couples without gender-based limitations which could include differently-gendered couples, same-sex couples<sup>29</sup>, and gender-nonconforming couples<sup>30</sup>.

We are all called to live with integrity in discipleship in the way of Christ<sup>31</sup>. This includes upholding our commitments—including marital covenants<sup>32</sup>. Our church supports faithfulness among married couples<sup>33</sup>, the flourishing of families and children<sup>34</sup>, and offers love and community to those who are single—whether they are individuals committed to a life of celibacy or those who are discerning the possibility of marriage<sup>35</sup>.

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nowhere in the Bible. We seek to avoid unnecessary obligations and interpretations of scripture that impose undue hardships on ourselves and others. Taftsville Chapel respectfully suggests that reserving marriage for couplings of a man and woman is not an essential command of God found in the Bible, and that same-sex couples are not excluded from the possibility of faithful and loving marriage.

<sup>28</sup> Many Christian theologians have addressed the topic of same-sex marriage. Often, their arguments have responded to understanding various portions of the Bible that speak to certain same-sex sexual interactions (i.e. Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9, etc). While there are debates among commentators about how these passages are rightly-interpreted, there is no explicit mention of the phrase “same-sex marriage” or an equivalent in the Hebrew Bible or Greek New Testament. Consequently, in the midst of biblical silence on the topic, different Christian churches have taken different positions as the Bible neither explicitly endorses nor prohibits same-sex marriage. Some examples of books that engage the question more extensively include:

- *Bible, Gender, Sexuality* by James V. Brownson
- *Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships* by Karen R. Keen
- *A Time to Embrace* by William Stacy Johnson
- *God and the Gay Christian* by Matthew Vines
- *God Believes in Love* by Gene Robinson
- *The Bible’s Yes to Same-Sex Marriage* by Mark Achtemeier

<sup>29</sup> One resource (“A Short Bible Study Supporting Same-Sex Christian Marriage”) that our denomination, Mennonite Church USA, has provided on the topic is available here:

<https://www.mennoniteusa.org/resource-portal/resource/bible-study-on-same-sex-christian-marriage/>

<sup>30</sup> Matthew 18:18-20

<sup>31</sup> Matthew 5:37, John 8:12, John 8:31-32

<sup>32</sup> Mark 10:7-9, 1 Corinthians 7:10

<sup>33</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:17, 1 Corinthians 7:2-4, Matthew 19:6, Ephesians 5:25-33

<sup>34</sup> Ephesians 6:1-4, Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy 5:16,

<sup>35</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:7, John 13:34-35

We encourage reconciliation in the midst of marital discord and the formative growth developed through persevering in challenges that are common to marriages; nevertheless, we are aware that certain circumstances undermine maintaining a marriage covenant<sup>36</sup>. Our church includes members who have experienced the grief and tragedy of divorce, and we understand that there are circumstances in which a marriage covenant has been broken that may warrant separation or divorce<sup>37</sup>. As a church, we mourn with those who mourn<sup>38</sup> in such circumstances, and are committed to care along the way and on the other side of grief.

Our church includes people who have been married after having experienced a divorce, and trust that there is pastoral discretion specific to the circumstances of officiating any wedding<sup>39</sup>.

We trust that the discernment process leading to wedding vows and a marital covenant are made beyond the couple, wedding officiant, or even the community of faith surrounding them; that ultimately, a sincere commitment is honored by Christ himself:

**“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”<sup>40</sup>**

## **Being Open to Change**

In the spirit of our core value of **Being Open to Change** we wish to remain open to the on-going work of the Holy Spirit to transform us into greater representations of the image of God; revealing the holiness of God in the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control<sup>41</sup>. When we look to our church’s past, we see times when the Spirit guided us into new developments along the way. Sometimes, changes in our

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<sup>36</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:10-15, Matthew 19:9

<sup>37</sup> Matthew 19:9, 1 Corinthians 7:15

<sup>38</sup> Romans 12:15

<sup>39</sup> Some in our church have looked to the guidance of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 navigating whether it is better to remain single, marry, remain married in the midst of specific challenges, or to separate, and/or marry another after a previous marriage. In 1 Corinthians 7:28, Paul writes: “ **...if you marry, you do not sin...**” in view of this phrase, we defer to the discernment of already married couples and the officiant of their weddings to have discerned the circumstances of their vows, and assume that marriage vows currently made are to be upheld (for instance, including marriages that are subsequent to a previous divorce). We see the task of the church to provide general support to married couples without needing to know all of the circumstances of their weddings and/or sexual histories.

<sup>40</sup> Matthew 18:18-20. *New Revised Standard Version*

<sup>41</sup> Galatians 5:22-23

church have been painful, leading to deep repentance. Nevertheless, we trust that the creativity of our God is an on-going work:

**“I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.”<sup>42</sup>**

Just as we commit ourselves to being open to the Spirit’s work, we ask that those who join us share an openness to being mutually-transformed into the likeness of Christ, with grace and integrity along the way. We trust God is making **“all things new”<sup>43</sup>** and this includes one another:

**“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we no longer know him in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being!**

**All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God. For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”<sup>44</sup>**

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<sup>42</sup> Philippians 1:6. *New Revised Standard Version*

<sup>43</sup> Revelation 21:5

<sup>44</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:16-21. *New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition*