

A Letter from Covenant President Gary Walter

February 25, 2015

Dear Covenanters,

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This correspondence is about the sensitive matter of human sexuality. This is an ever-present reality of our culture, deserving of earnest biblical and pastoral reflection as we seek to be faithful disciples of Christ engaging people to find and follow Jesus.

Thank you for taking the time to read this prayerfully and carefully. I offer it to you from my perspective as president, one who serves and loves this church, just as you do. I write respectfully, mindful of the gravity, complexity, and pain these matters can bring for ourselves, families, congregants, friends, colleagues, and society.

Regardless of the topic, the Evangelical Covenant Church seeks to engage in mission and ministry in ways that are biblically derived, pastorally sensitive, and consistent with our polity. The same is true for the matter of human sexuality.

The center of our biblically rooted position is this: “Heterosexual marriage, faithfulness within marriage, abstinence outside of marriage—these constitute the Christian standard.”

There is no intent to single out select behavior. It is a high challenge to every one of us: single, married, young, old, both genders, all orientations. Each of us is inclined, in one way or another, to go beyond that boundary in different ways. It speaks to the single person wrestling with purity, the wife or husband tempted to an affair, the person wanting to click on a link, the young unmarried couple in love, and the man or woman navigating same-sex attraction. If we are reading it as intended, our response ought to be, “this is written to me.” That recognition about our own proneness to wander ought to create humility within each of us, and greater patience with one another, avoiding selective indignation around matters of sexual practice.

Even so, we affirm that God’s boundaries, whatever the dimension of life, and regardless of the cost, are meant for our flourishing.

At our recent Midwinter Conference for Covenant clergy, I reviewed three principles for how we navigate forward. These come jointly from the Council of Superintendents and Covenant Offices Leadership Team, further endorsed by the Board of the Ordered Ministry (which develops and applies clergy policy and guidelines). By way of summary, the three are:

1. We affirm the Covenant position. The Covenant Annual Meeting, the ECC’s highest governing authority (comprised principally of delegates from local congregations), established the Covenant position in 2004 (excerpted above), and additionally established it as (1) our guiding statement on human sexuality and the marriage ethic and (2) the basis for policy, practices, and guidelines.
2. We affirm that within our position there is good and ample room for good and wise ministry. There is much we can and ought to learn from one another.

3. Along with learning from one another, we confess that together we can do a better job in lifting up and developing resources within our position that will help all of us engage in meaningful ministry with real people with real stories. There is a growing body of resources and models to draw from, and fruitful interchange helps us all hone better practices.

And so we affirm our biblically rooted position; we affirm that there is good room for good ministry within our position; and we acknowledge together we can do a better job of highlighting ministry resources within it. This will be a season of progress.

I would like to offer two pastoral words. First, to LGBTQ individuals, their families, and friends. We recognize the very real sense of pain and marginalization that can occur in our society around LGBTQ matters. I don't doubt, whether intended or not, there are times Covenant churches, as others, may not have always been a safe place to ask questions and seek counsel. For this I grieve. As the church, our sentiment is not to fight a culture war but to love people. We believe it is possible to hold to our biblical view while acknowledging the humanity of all individuals, ministering to needs with pastoral sensitivity and graciousness. There are manifold examples of Covenant churches doing just that. I would hope it would be true of every congregation as we navigate forward.

Second, a pastoral word to all of us. The cross-currents of these matters have torn at other fellowships to the roiling diminishment of cohesion, resources, and ministry. We are exceptional in many ways, but I would not presume that we would be the exception in this case. We may have strength, but we are not invincible. And we are not as universally strong as we might wish to believe with both denominational and regional conference vulnerabilities.

And so I ask that from every direction that we be marked by humility and a servant heart; that we keep learning from one another about how to minister well within this framework; that we be always motivated by seeking God's glory and neighbor's good. That is our call. That is our hope. That is who we are at our best.

This Lent, we reflect on the sacrifice of our Savior who loved the world. That same world is full of searching people who wonder if there is a God who really loves them. In the Covenant, may they know that the answer is yes.

In Prayerful Partnership,

Gary Walter  
President, The Evangelical Covenant Church

Feel free to write me on this subject at [GBWalter@covchurch.org](mailto:GBWalter@covchurch.org)

This letter is being distributed to the Covenant Leader Letter list, comprised of Covenant clergy, congregational chairs, and others in various service roles throughout the Evangelical Covenant Church. Permission is granted to forward.