

**Questions and Answers About the Work of the  
Deacons' Openness Task Force**  
**University Baptist Church, Charlottesville, VA**  
**June 6, 2016**

**1. What is the Openness Task Force?**

The Deacons created the Openness Task Force in October, 2015, in response to discussions at its earlier joint leadership retreat with the Church Council, October 3, 2015. The Task Force was asked to consider whether the church's current statement about church membership needs to be qualified in any way regarding openly gay Christians who might seek to unite with University Baptist Church. Presently, the Constitution and Bylaws makes no distinctions among categories of persons who may be considered for membership. (Relevant sections are printed at the end of the Q&A.)

This question about membership for gay Christians has arisen in the past. Dr. Tom Leland invited Dr. Dan Bagby of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond to lead a Wednesday night series in March, 2005, about human sexuality, including same-sex attraction, and how the Bible speaks to the experience of same-sex attraction. More recently, in the Fall, 2013, Dr. Michael Cheuk invited other faculty members of BTSR to lead a similar Wednesday night series. However, neither of these series led the congregation to any substantial discussion of its stance toward gay Christians. Many members have expressed dissatisfaction over the church's inaction following these series.

This dissatisfaction and continuing questions led the Deacons to appoint the Task Force, composed of Erin Brown, Bill Jesser, Debby Johnson, Pam Johnson, Ed Lowry, Peter Ohlms, and Sarah Wilson.

**2. What is the Openness Task Force recommending to the Deacons?**

The Task Force, at the Deacons' request, is preparing an outline of steps the congregation might take to consider the experience of gay Christians, especially those in Baptist life; the Bible's guidance; the best current understanding about same-sex attraction; and the range of responses that UBC could take in clarifying its stance on membership.

Once the Deacons agree on a process, the Task Force will sponsor a short-term period of small-group study (probably through adult Sunday School classes); personal testimonies; a church-wide discussion; and a congregational vote expressing its best response.

The possible actions the church might take could range from "do nothing for now" to "decide now" on whether to open membership to LGBTQ-Christians. Which particular action the church should take in this interim time is part of what it will need to discern. The Deacons want to provide the congregation sufficient time to make this inquiry without unduly burdening the congregation with a prolonged discussion that many may find uncomfortable.

**3. Is it a good idea to proceed with this inquiry during UBC's interim transition?**

Candidates for the Senior Minister's position will quite likely ask about our church's stance on participation and membership for openly gay Christians. Given the degree of interest already present in our fellowship to address this issue, the Deacons believe we should be ready to give candidates a reasonable idea of where UBC may be headed. Not to do so would sow the seeds for later disruption if

the next Senior Minister turned out to be of an entirely different mind than we are about LGBTQ-inclusion.

#### **4. What exactly do the letters LGBTQ stand for?**

LGBTQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender; the Q depends on who you ask. For some, Q stands for Questioning, that is, people who are unsure of their sexual orientation. For others, the Q stands for Queer. For many of us who are straight, we only know the word “queer” as a derogatory term. However, advocates for gay rights want to reclaim and redefine the word in a positive light. The word “gay” is also considered appropriate when speaking in general of non-straight people (and is preferred over the term “homosexuals”).

#### **5. Why are churches being forced to decide about gay inclusion, especially when so many church members find the whole conversation uncomfortable and disruptive?**

When or if a Baptist church considers gay inclusion is its decision alone to make. Whether a Baptist church decides to prohibit membership of gay Christians, to entirely open up membership for gay Christian, or something in-between that suits its members, the decision is entirely up to each congregation. Baptist churches are self-governing and set their own practices as each understands the will of Jesus Christ for itself.

However, gay Christians across the denominational spectrum, including Baptists, are now asking their church families to welcome them openly. Simply put, gay Christians now find our larger society a much safer place for them to be open about their sexual orientation. With many of the societal and legal barriers removed, gay Christians are asking for religious barriers to be removed by their fellow believers.

#### **6. Is it a “done deal” that University Baptist Church will sooner or later extend full membership to openly gay persons on the same basis as for straight persons?**

No, it is by no means a “done deal”. The Deacons and the ministerial staff know that this must be a discussion for the congregation to have so that the congregation can assess its own stance and makes its own decision. The Deacons are committed to offering a process that provides sufficient time and information for the congregation to reach its own best conclusions.

#### **7. If UBC were to open its membership to LGBTQ persons, would that mean we would begin advocating for gay rights, for example, by displaying “rainbow flags” or somehow promoting a “gay agenda”?**

No. While some churches have gone that route, in fact, many gay Christians have expressed their desire to find a “regular family church” much like the churches in which they were raised and came to faith in Jesus Christ. They don’t want their sexual orientation to be an object of attention or promotion when they come to church. UBC would be inquiring only into whether its open policy of receiving anyone into full membership and participation who comes professing faith in Jesus and seeking baptism, or who comes already a baptized believer, applies equally to gay persons as to straight persons.

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**UNIVERSITY BAPTIST CHURCH  
CONSTITUTION AND BYLAWS  
Sections Regarding Church Membership**

**CONSTITUTION, Article IV. Constituency**

**2. Members**

As shall be more fully set forth in the by-laws, the membership of this church shall consist of persons who have:

- a. Made a public profession of their experience of and faith in Jesus Christ.
- b. Been baptized;
- c. Expressed a sincere desire to participate in the life and work of this church; and
- d. Presented publicly in a worship service to enter the covenant of membership.

All members shall be entitled to vote on matters of church business, and shall be eligible to hold positions of church leadership and service.

**3. Associate Members**

A person who wishes to retain membership in his or her home church or who expects to reside in the Charlottesville area for a limited time may become an associate member by presenting himself or herself at any worship service, stating a profession of faith in Christ and a commitment to this congregation.

Associate members shall be entitled to vote on matters of church business, and shall be eligible to hold positions of church leadership and service, other than church officer, deacon, committee/council chair, organizational director, and church council member.

**BYLAWS, Article II, Membership.**

**1. Candidacy for Membership**

A. Any person may present himself or herself as a candidate for membership in this church. All such presentations will be made publicly at any regular worship service at which an invitation is given, and membership will be approved by the vote of the congregation. If a person is physically unable to be present to respond to an invitation, then a Minister may present the candidate's request for membership to the congregation for approval by vote.

It is expected that all candidates will:

1. Publicly profess a personal faith in Jesus Christ; and
2. Be of sufficient age and maturity to understand and exercise the responsibility of Christian living and church membership; and
3. Be familiar with this congregation, and willing to commit as a member to full participation, support, and service; and
4. Meet one of the following criteria:
  - a. Profess a prior experience of Christian baptism, regardless of the mode of baptism; or
  - b. Undergo baptism by immersion<sup>1</sup> in this church; or
  - c. Request transfer of a letter of membership from another Christian church where possible; or
  - d. Request restitution of membership where the candidate's previous membership in this church has been terminated.

B. All new members will be encouraged to participate in a new members' class.

C. The Senior Minister is responsible for postponing the presentation for membership of any candidate who does not meet the above criteria or who may require more introduction or preparation. In the absence of the Senior Minister, this task belongs to an Associate Minister or the Chair of Active Deacons. Any such postponement is subject to review and recommendation of the Active Deacons.

<sup>1</sup>For good cause, including but not limited to medical necessity, the congregation may vote to allow a substitute form of baptism.

## 2. Rights of Members

Every member of the church:

- A. May participate in the worship services, ministries, and activities of the church as administered by the church;
- B. Is entitled to vote at all elections and on all questions submitted to the church in conference, provided the member is present; and
- C. Is eligible for consideration by the membership as a candidate for elective offices and other leadership/service positions in the church.

## 3. Responsibilities of Members

Every member of the church is expected to participate and support the church in the following ways:

- A. To attend worship services, educational programs, and fellowship activities regularly;
- B. To give generously to the financial support of the church;
- C. To serve in the work of the church;
- D. To love and pray for one another;
- E. To promote the unity and harmony of the church; and
- F. To bear witness to Christ both in the church and in the world.

## 4. Termination of Membership

Membership may be terminated in any of the following ways:

- A. By death of the member;
- B. By transfer of letter of membership to another congregation;
- C. By request of the member; or
- D. By exclusion due to action of the congregation. In this case a three-fourths vote of the members and associate members present in church conference is required for exclusion.

## 5. Associate Members

A person may present himself or herself as a candidate to be an associate member by stating a profession of faith in Jesus Christ and a commitment to this congregation. All such presentations will be made publicly at any regular worship service at which an invitation is given, and will be approved by the vote of the congregation. If a person is physically unable to be present to respond to an invitation, then a Minister may present the candidate's request for membership to the congregation for approval by vote.

It is expected that all associate member candidates will:

- 1. Publicly profess a personal faith in Jesus Christ
- 2. Be sufficient age and maturity to understand and exercise the responsibility of Christian living and church associate membership;
- 3. Be familiar with this congregation, and willing to commit as an associate member to full participation, support, and service.

Associate members shall have the same rights and responsibilities as members, except that associates are not eligible for election to be a church officer, deacon, committee or council chair, organizational director, or church council member.

The relationship of associate members with the church may be terminated for any of the following:

- (1) By death of the associate member;
- (2) By the associate member moving out of the area;
- (3) By lack of participation of the associate member;
- (4) By request of the associate member;
- (5) By exclusion due to action of the congregation. In this case a three-fourths vote of the members and associate members present in church conference is required for exclusion.