

Theological Statement - Frequently Asked Questions

TIMELINE OF THE JOURNEY

- In March 2022, First United Methodist Church of Lexington, Kentucky began an intentional season of discernment about the theological identity of the church and our future denominational affiliation.
- In Summer 2022, First UMC published a series of podcasts (Season 4) updating the congregation on what had happened thus far and setting a timeline for the future.
- Also in Summer of 2022, our pastoral team hosted a 12 week theology of sexuality intensive.
- In Fall of 2022, our pastoral team hosted a 15 week study on theology, biblical studies, and church history along with another series of podcasts (Season 5).
- Drawing on our numerous studies and discernment work, the pastoral team drafted a theological identity statement and presented it in January 2023 to Vision team—a First UMC committee made up of all committee chairs, each community's lay leader, and the pastoral team.
- In February 2023, Vision team edited and revised the Theological Identity Statement.
- From March 2023 to May 2023, the Administrative Council—the governing body of First Church—edited and revised the Theological Identity Statement.
- On May 30th, the Administrative Council adopted the Theological Identity Statement of First United Methodist Church and its Associated Pragmatic Implications.
- In Fall of 2023, the pastoral team plans to expand upon the work addressed in our theology statement and continue our discipleship in this area.

PRAGMATIC QUESTIONS

Q: Does the theology statement affirm same-sex marriage or does the statement prohibit it?

The theology statement does neither. Rather, it states that same-sex marriage is not a dogmatic issue which would mandate leaving a denomination over the interpretive differences surrounding it.

See, particularly: the Preamble and Section 9 of the statement.

Q: Can First Church Clergy officiate same-sex marriages or not?

Our Book of Discipline does not currently allow United Methodist clergy to officiate same-sex marriages. If the Book of Discipline changes in the future, clergy may officiate same-sex marriages.

The clergy of First United Methodist Church of Lexington, Kentucky are credentialed through the Kentucky Annual Conference and are appointed by the Bishop of the Kentucky Annual Conference. They are subject to and abide by the Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church which prohibits clergy from officiating same-sex marriages; therefore, no clergy of First United Methodist Church will officiate same-sex marriages as long as the Book of Discipline prohibits it.

The only body of the United Methodist Church which can change the Book of Discipline is the General Conference which meets once every four years. The next General Conference is scheduled to meet in Spring 2024. If any changes are made to the Book of Discipline, our clergy would use our theological statement to guide their decisions in whom they would marry.

Q: Will First Church allow same-sex marriages in our buildings or not?

Our Book of Discipline does not currently allow United Methodist Church buildings to be used for same-sex marriages. If the Book of Discipline changes in the future, there may be same-sex marriages hosted in the buildings.

First United Methodist Church of Lexington, Kentucky is a congregation of the United Methodist Church. As such, we are subject to and abide by the Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church. The Book of Discipline prohibits local congregations from hosting same sex marriages in their facilities; therefore, no campus of First United Methodist Church will host same-sex marriages as long as the Book of Discipline prohibits it.

The only body of the United Methodist Church which can change the Book of Discipline is the General Conference which meets once every four years. The next General Conference is scheduled to meet in Spring 2024. If any changes are made to the Book of Discipline, our theological statement will guide how First proceeds.

Q: Will First Church receive appointments of married gay clergy?

First United Methodist Church of Lexington, Kentucky is a congregation of the United Methodist Church. As such, we are subject to and abide by the Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church. The Book of Discipline prohibits anyone who is NOT 1) married to someone of the opposite sex or 2) celibate from serving as clergy. The Bishop and the cabinet of the Kentucky Conference appoint all clergy to United Methodist churches in Kentucky in consultation with the local church's Staff Parish Relations Committee.

The only body of the United Methodist Church which can change the Book of Discipline is the General Conference which meets once every four years. The next General Conference meets in Spring 2024. If any changes are made to the Book of Discipline, there would be implications for our District Committees on Ordained Ministry, for our Conference Board of Ordained Ministry, for our Conference Appointive Cabinet, and for our Bishop as they seek to credential and appoint clergy.

Our process for the appointment of clergy is consultative, with our Staff-Parish Relations Committee working with our District Superintendent and our Bishop for what we are looking for in the clergy appointed to First Church. Moving forward, alignment with our theological statement will be one of the primary criteria of our clergy profile.

Q: If the United Methodist Church changes its stance on dogma, how will First Church respond?

Because of the polity structure of the United Methodist Church, this is very unlikely. However, if this happens, First Church will convene the Administrative Council and discuss next steps.

HISTORICAL/CONTEXTUAL QUESTIONS

Q: I am unfamiliar with the structure of the United Methodist Church as a denomination. What is General Conference? What is the Book of Discipline? How are things decided in the denomination? How did we get to this point in our denomination?

For a history of how the particular issues of the officiation of same-sex marriages and the appointment of married gay clergy reached a crisis point in the United Methodist Church, please listen to Season 4, Episode 1 (beginning at 8:05) of our First Church

Leadership Podcast. For vocabulary questions (e.g. General Conference, Jurisdictional Conference, etc), please check out our definitions page.¹

Q: There have been so many denominational splits over this particular issue, and not around others. How did the church get to this place regarding homosexuality?

For a historical overview of the particular issues of marriage and sexuality and why they have become defining issues of our contemporary political and theological landscape, please listen to Season 5, Episode 3 of our First Church Leadership Podcast. For a historical overview of how the American church has responded to the particular issues of marriage and sexuality, please listen to Season 5, Episode 4 of our First Church Leadership Podcast.

THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

Q: Why is the document so long? Does this topic not simply boil down to whether the Bible prohibits same-sex sex or not?

One of the central claims of our theological document and of our communication with you all this last year is that while our current denominational conflict is often framed as a simple question of whether the Bible prohibits or affirms same-sex marriage, the conflict itself is much deeper. It touches on questions of the inspiration of Scripture, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the role of the Church, and God's justice within the world, to name a few.

Simply answering this yes or no question still leaves unresolved other important questions: What does sanctification look like in one's sexual life? What is sexual flourishing? How do Christians navigate sexual desire and arousal? What does community look like? How precisely is one conformed to the image of Christ in one's sexuality?

There is no ready-made theology of the body or theology of sexuality for the contemporary church to take up and use to minister to our congregations and to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. This is the creative work of the Church in our generation and is the work we are tasked to do.

¹ <https://lextogether.org/blog/2022/05/01/definitions-and-frequently-asked-questions/>

Q: Why include sections on things like the trinity, the incarnation, or the resurrection? Aren't those already agreed upon?

The trinity (§1-2), the incarnation (§2), and the resurrection (§5) are indeed what we refer to as dogma—theological claims of the church which are entirely settled. These are claims that have been robustly argued over decades and decided by ecumenical councils. Far from being abstract constructs or theories which only concern theologians, dogmatic claims like these make sense of every other theological claim that the church holds. For instance, the trinity, the incarnation, and the resurrection are present in our understanding of Holy Scripture (§7), the sacraments (§8), and even how we relate to one another as a part of the Holy Church (§6).

These sections are included to affirm first principles. By doing so, we hope to more concretely affirm what we all can and must agree upon—dogma—while leaving room for robust debate about other matters. What is not communicated in our theology statement is that dogma is the only thing that matters. Rather, dogma is that which guides everything else and that which we use to understand our humanity, our embodiment, and our sexuality.

Q: Why are LGBTQ+ persons not directly mentioned in the statement? By not directly addressing the particular question of gay marriage and the validity of gay romantic life, is this statement not simply obscuring the real issue of justice at stake and implicitly excluding the experiences of LGBTQ+ people?

As we have said previously,² gay and lesbian persons are, and have been since the inception of the UMC over 50 years ago, an integral part of congregations, staff, and clergy leadership—and this is no different at First. At First, our conversation has never been one about people and experiences outside of our communities, our families, and our relationships. It has always been about us—about people in our community.

In our social and political landscape, LGBTQ+ people have been marginalized, devalued, idealized, and tokenized—often reduced to a homogenous group and spoken about rather than to and with. Theological statements about sexuality risk repeating this pattern of homogenization by using social and political categories and concepts rather than theological ones. In the last 75+ years, this is the only way the contemporary church has navigated these questions.

As we stated in our work last fall [Season 5, Episode 5], we desired to produce a statement that is robustly theological and which then informs our social and political

² <https://lextogether.org/blog/2022/05/01/definitions-and-frequently-asked-questions/>

thinking, not the other way around. In Section 3, we articulate a theological understanding of humanity which can then be used to understand and refine the language of sexual identity and sexual orientation as well as gender identity. By using the language of chastity, we demonstrate that all Christians, regardless of marital or sexual status, are moving toward the same goal—embodying the chaste love of Jesus Christ. Everything we do as a church, then, focuses on helping all people achieve this perfect love in their personal lives as well as their social and political ones. This is justice.

More theological work will be done at First to expand upon the categories we have laid out in our theology statement.

Q: I am having difficulty navigating Section 3. The language feels too abstract and the language of chastity confuses me. What is at stake in this section?

No doubt many of us when we hear the word “chastity” think of a prohibition of sex or associate chastity with virginity. This is not what we mean by this word. Simply speaking, chastity is a virtue—a discipline, practice, and goal rooted in and oriented to the perfect love of God and neighbor.

We understand that the particulars of how one practices chastity and lives into this virtue are left unaddressed in our theology statement. We plan on teaching more about chastity this fall and helping you all to integrate this theological concept into your everyday lives.