



**WILSHIRE
BAPTIST CHURCH**

June 30, 2016

To Wilshire's Deacon Officers:

On behalf of the Inclusion and Diversity Study group, I am writing to present you with our findings, in fulfillment of our charge from last year's deacon officers.

What you are receiving in addition to this cover letter is two reports: One is the Majority Report from the Study Group, and the other is a response to that report by a minority within the group. It never was our goal or even a likelihood that our 19-member group would be able to reach unanimity on the difficult questions posed to us. If it were that easy, our group would have been unnecessary. And know also that the majority asked specifically for the minority voices to freely express their views as well. We want both perspectives to be known.

However, please note that the majority opinion represents a clear majority view on all four questions, as indicated by the vote totals below. This is highlighted to let the deacons understand that our deliberations, while not producing unanimity, have produced a clear majority. While the report gives more details of our answers to the four questions posed at the time of our formation, it might be helpful for you to know the exact breakdown of our final votes within the Study Group. Please understand that within these answers, there are degrees of nuance on individual opinions that cannot be reflected here.

QUESTION	NO LIMITATIONS BASED ON LGBT STATUS	SOME LIMITATIONS BASED ON LGBT STATUS
(1) What limitations, if any, should be placed on deacon service and other leadership roles in the church?	15 (79%)	4 (21%)
(2) What limitations, if any, should be placed on ordination to the gospel ministry?	13 (68%)	6 (32%)
(3) What limitations, if any, should be placed on marriages performed at Wilshire and/or officiated by Wilshire staff members?	13 (68%)	6 (32%)
(4) What limitations, if any, should be placed on family dedications performed at Wilshire?	15 (79%)	4 (21%)

Based on these outcomes, the Majority Report of the Study Group recommends to the deacon body that we as a congregation affirm—not change—our existing bylaws, which currently contain no limitations regarding sexual orientation or gender identity. It is only by unwritten practice that Wilshire has in the past precluded leadership service by persons who identified within the LGBT spectrum, if such preclusions have actually happened at all. To the best of our knowledge, there has not yet been any request for a same-sex wedding at Wilshire or for the dedication of a baby parented by a same-sex couple. However, we fully anticipate that such requests will be made in the future, and therefore it is important for church leadership to have thought about this now.

Following the pattern of the church's 1991 study on ordaining females, single adults and previously married persons, it might be advisable for the deacons to ask the church to affirm our existing bylaws by adoption of a statement such as this:

“Wilshire Baptist Church is called to minister equally to all persons, extending to them the privileges afforded to any follower of Christ, including, but not limited to, membership, leadership, ordination and marriage, and will not differentiate among members on any basis save for spiritual fitness.”

The rationale for how we came to this position is detailed in the Majority Report. To reiterate: Just as with the 1991 decision, we are not calling for a bylaw amendment, only a statement of the congregation's understanding.

The greatest difference between the majority and minority reports centers on the question of whether or not same-sex acts are inherently sinful. Neither the majority nor the minority wants to prevent anyone who identifies along the LGBT spectrum from being part of our community of faith. We respectfully disagree about behavior, not identity, and this also has repercussions on the issue of marriage.

We realize that in presenting this report to the deacons, our group will have completed its work, unless otherwise directed. We want you to know, though, of our strongly held opinion that the full text of both the majority and minority reports should be published for the entire congregation to read as soon as possible. In the spirit of transparency that has been called for in our work, this seems to be the appropriate thing to do.

Finally, we wish to thank the 2015 deacon officers for entrusting us with this sacred duty. None of us has entered this task lightly, and each of us has devoted countless hours to study, prayer and listening. We all have been changed by the process and are grateful for the new friendships made within our group.

Sincerely,

James Perry
Chair, Inclusion and Diversity Study Group

**WILSHIRE BAPTIST CHURCH
INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY STUDY GROUP**

**MAJORITY REPORT
TO THE DEACONS
June 30, 2016**

Summary Recommendation

In September 2015, the Inclusion and Diversity Study Group was appointed by the then-serving deacon officers of Wilshire Baptist Church for the stated purpose of giving “guidance to church leadership on a range of issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity and the life of the church.” At the conclusion of a thorough and thoughtful process described below, a majority of the Study Group submits this report to the deacon body with the recommendation that persons who identify as LGBT be welcomed and accepted by Wilshire Baptist Church, and be entitled to participate in the life of the church, on the same basis as any other person. Accordingly, a majority of the Study Group recommends that each of the so-called “four questions” assigned to it for study be answered in the negative, thereby placing no limitations related to sexual orientation or gender identity on deacon service or other leadership roles in the church, ordination to the gospel ministry, marriages performed at Wilshire and/or officiated by Wilshire staff members or family dedications performed at Wilshire. Any currently existing limitations applicable to any person seeking to participate in the life of the church in one or more of these ways, which are generally applied upon exercise of the judgment and discretion of church committees or the ministerial staff, would, of course, apply to LGBT persons as well as to any other person.

A detailed description of the background for the appointment of the Study Group, the process undertaken by the Study Group in arriving at the conclusions reached and its findings and recommendations follows.

A minority of the Study Group has submitted a Minority Report (herein so called). The Minority Report will be addressed below. It appears that the principal difference between this report and the Minority Report is not whether LGBT persons should be welcomed and loved at Wilshire but what limitations and restrictions, if any, should be placed on their participation in the life of the church.

Background

When the Study Group was appointed, Kathy Alverson, then chairwoman of deacons, explained in an article that appeared in the *Tapestry*: “Over the summer months, deacon officers have been working to respond to two related threads of inquiry that have come to our attention. The Deacon Nominating Committee has made a request to the deacon officers for guidance in its work, specifically asking to know if a member’s sexual orientation should be a consideration in eligibility for deacon service. In addition, the senior pastor has asked for guidance on how the church should respond to the recent Supreme Court ruling legalizing same-sex marriage, believing this needs to be a deliberate and open decision process of the church. These two things,

although separate in origin, have combined at this moment in time to require special study by the congregation, beginning with the deacons.”

At the same time, Senior Pastor George Mason noted that questions have been asked about what is meant by the emphasis on “inclusion” and “diversity” that ranked at the top of the Vision 20/20 member-input process in 2013. He said: “It seems apparent that while we as a congregation highly valued these concepts, we do not all mean the same thing when we use the same words. The present moment seems like an appropriate time to answer this question.”

In her report to the deacons announcing the appointment of the Study Group, Kathy Alverson stated the group was being appointed to give guidance to the deacons and the pastoral staff in understanding and responding to current issues of sexual orientation and their relationship to what it means for Wilshire to be an inclusive and diverse community of faith seeking to follow the way of Christ in our time. The Study Group was tasked with studying four questions:

- (1) What limitations, if any, should be placed on deacon service and other leadership roles in the church?
- (2) What limitations, if any, should be placed on ordination to the gospel ministry?
- (3) What limitations, if any, should be placed on marriages performed at Wilshire and/or officiated by Wilshire staff members?
- (4) What limitations, if any, should be placed on family dedications performed at Wilshire?

As a preliminary matter, it may be worthwhile to make a few observations about the Study Group and its work:

Majority View. This report is supported by a “majority” of the members of the Study Group. In fact, the majority represents more than a simple majority. The majority positions on deacon ordination and baby dedications are supported by a 79% majority, and the majority positions on clergy ordination and marriage are supported by a 68% majority. Both within the majority and the minority, there are nuances of opinion on specific issues. In this report, the word “majority” has been used to refer to the above-referenced percentages ranging from 68% to 79%, while realizing it is a blanket term that may not account for the detailed nuances of each person’s opinion. Likewise, the term “minority” has been used to refer to those who dissent from the majority view in any way, also realizing this blanket term may not reflect the detailed nuances of each person’s opinion. Further, there are some specific issues on which an individual may concur with the majority, even though on other specific issues he or she may concur with the minority. Achieving unanimity was not practical, nor was it deemed to be a prerequisite to submitting a report.

Diversity and Independence. The Study Group is itself a diverse group, made up of a broad spectrum of the Wilshire membership—single and married, men and women, those with children at home of varying ages, those with grown children or none at all, long-time members and relatively new members. The deacon officers established written criteria for appointing Study Group members (including such things as being open

mindful and capable of engaging in thoughtful research and discernment, the ability to represent the attitudes and thoughts of some constituency within the congregation and to be a trusted communicator back to that constituency and the ability to devote the time required for meetings and study over a period of months). Nowhere in that list of criteria was there room for a determination of a person's views on the subject of homosexuality. In fact, members of the Study Group have uniformly reported that no one inquired about their personal views on the subject when discussing service on the Study Group. Each member believes that it is important for the congregation to understand that he or she came to the study process and has engaged in the process as an independent thinker, with a genuine desire to listen and learn.

Difficulty of the Task. In announcing formation of the Study Group, Kathy Alverson observed that the task would not be easy but would be motivated by love for the church. How prophetic those words would turn out to be. Many in the Study Group would say that this is the most difficult assignment they ever have undertaken for the church. Difficult not just because of the volume of reading and study required, and the complexity of the pertinent issues from a theological, scientific and social standpoint, or the number of meetings to be attended, but also, and perhaps most significantly, because of what is at stake. The Study Group is very much aware that there are many within the congregation who opposed even the formation of such a group and certainly will oppose the recommendations being made by this report. Emotions have run high, and the emotions and controversy could continue for some indeterminate time into the future. Each member of the Study Group has been mindful of the gravity of the task, and the responsibility of serving weighed heavily on each of us.

Outpouring of Support. Given the difficulty of the task, the Study Group has been sustained and encouraged by the many signs of support and prayer from the congregation over these many months and this from persons who hold vastly differing views on the subject. This reflects the love for the church about which Kathy spoke. The more than 600 persons who attended our Information Seminars and the more than 300 people who participated in our Roundtable Dialogues are reflective of a congregation that cares.

On Unity. It has been the hope and desire of the Study Group from the inception to find a way forward on these issues that will maintain the unity of the church to the maximum extent possible, recognizing that honest differences of opinion among our membership will be inevitable. The Study Group recognizes that what the church decides and how it decides will impact the future of the fellowship. We are prayerful that our recommendations and the spirit in which they are given will serve to strengthen both the mission and the unity of the church for years to come. There will be more on this subject in the Conclusion to this report.

LGB and T. The Study Group has studied both sexual orientation and gender identity issues in the course of our work. It is important for all to understand the difference between these two concepts. Sexual orientation refers to emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to another person. For the majority of people, this attraction is to persons of the opposite gender, but for some the attraction is to persons of their own gender or to

persons of either gender. Gender identity is the internal perception of one's gender, who one knows oneself to be—not to whom one is attracted for relationship. Transgender persons are those whose gender identity and expression do not line up precisely according to the physical characteristics of birth. Christians believe that all people are created in the image of God (Genesis 1 and 2), are called to relationship with God through Christ and are invited to participate in Christ's body, the Church. We find it important for the Church to understand that none of the terms "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual" or "transgender" should be equated with "pedophile." The Church does great harm by any actions that perpetuate a misunderstanding on this point.

Process

The Study Group was assigned to study the "four questions" by the deacon officers, but the Group rather quickly came to the conclusion that it could not give direction on those questions without first examining more foundational questions:

- (1) What does the Bible say about same-sex orientation and behavior and how have the relevant texts been interpreted by theologians, scholars, pastors and others?
- (2) What do modern science and medicine have to tell us about the nature of same-sex orientation and behavior?
- (3) What might we learn about same-sex attraction from those who deal personally with this matter as their own experience?

A word about terminology: same-sex "orientation" has reference to the attraction of a person to members of his or her same gender rather than being attracted to members of the opposite gender. Same-sex "behavior" has reference to acting in accordance with a person's same-sex orientation.

As of this writing, the Study Group has met 23 times, typically for two hours at a time, for a total of more than 46 hours of meeting time since October 6, 2015. That, of course, is in addition to time spent reading and studying various books and other materials and to time spent preparing for and attending the various Information Seminars and Roundtable Dialogue Sessions.

The Study Group started by studying the Bible—including, but not limited to, the so-called seven "prohibitive" texts that deal specifically with the subject of homosexuality and, uniformly, do so in a generally prohibitive manner. All or a portion of each of the first several meetings was devoted to this endeavor. Perhaps not surprisingly, while many in the Study Group had been taught or otherwise learned from their various backgrounds the general notion that there was something inherently "wrong" with same-sex orientation and certainly same-sex behavior, there was not universal familiarity with the pertinent biblical texts among Study Group members.

Concurrently with the study of Scripture, an early task was to develop a bibliography to guide our research and to share with the congregation. The books in the bibliography ranged from scholarly theological and scientific works to personal testimonies of pastors, LGBT Christians and their families. Some members of the Study Group have read 10 to 15 books in this period, and every member has read at least several of the books on the bibliography. Written book

reports were prepared and presented and/or distributed to the group. The resulting bibliography was shared with the congregation.

Another regular agenda item was to report on and discuss the voluminous email and other forms of congregational feedback that was being received by virtually all members of the Study Group.

It quickly became apparent to the Study Group that in order to enhance congregational background understanding, it would be necessary to engage the congregation in study along with the group. Furthermore, the congregation made it clear that it wanted to study along with the Study Group in some way, and several Sunday School classes and teachers were making plans to address the subject on their own. It seemed best to have a more church-wide approach to learning together. To that end, the Study Group crafted a two-hour Information Seminar that was intended to cover various ways of interpreting Scripture and various ways of understanding same-sex attraction among faithful Christians who maintain a belief in the authority and inspiration of holy Scripture. Every attempt was made to present the Information Seminars in the most objective and unbiased manner possible. Among other reasons, this was done so that the congregation might appreciate the diversity of opinions held by thoughtful, committed Christians.

At the same time, we determined it was important for the Study Group to hear from the congregation directly, to better understand their stories and viewpoints, especially in reaction to the Information Seminars. Thus, four Roundtable Dialogues were held that allowed the Study Group to hear from the congregation directly and the congregation to hear from each other, thereby helping all of us to comprehend the diversity of opinions that exist within our own faith community.

The Study Group also heard direct personal testimony from individuals and family members who have faced or are currently facing the reality of same-sex attraction in their lives, some of whom challenged us to consider solutions that pointed in opposite directions.

The Study Group has studied, prayed, discussed, questioned and agonized over the questions before it. The group members have been faithful in attending meetings and diligent, conscientious, thoughtful and respectful of one another and their differing views.

Findings

In the Information Seminars, four models of understanding same-sex attraction within the church and culture were presented. They were labeled as Viewpoints A, B, C and D and are summarized as follows:

- **Viewpoint A** sees same-sex attraction as disordered desire that must be changed if one is to experience salvation and inclusion in the church. This view sees the cause of same-sex attraction as most likely environmental (*i.e.*, choice) and believes same-sex attraction can be corrected or cured. Under Viewpoint A, not only is same-sex behavior sinful, but same-sex attraction is sinful as well.

- **Viewpoint B** sees same-sex attraction as not sinful in and of itself but as something that must be controlled by spiritual discipline. This view maintains a sexual ethic of celibacy before marriage and faithfulness in marriage as applicable to all people, but with marriage being defined uniquely as a union between one male and one female. Those experiencing same-sex attraction may be faithful to Christ by remaining single and celibate throughout the course of their lives. In accordance with Viewpoint B, the church should teach that sexual relations are intended by God only in heterosexual relationships sealed by the covenant of marriage.
- **Viewpoint C** is grounded on the premise that most people who experience same-sex attraction have not chosen to be that way but believe this is an orientation that is given to them in their created nature. Based both on experience and a careful reading of the Bible, homosexuality is seen as sinful only when it violates the nature of how a person was made by God or when it violates the same standards of sexual activity that would apply to heterosexuals, that is, sexual relations outside of a monogamous, committed relationship.
- **Viewpoint D** does not give the same credence to biblical authority as the other views, and it would leave same-sex attraction to be addressed in whatever way the individual wishes without boundaries imposed by the church. This view might allow for having more than one open romantic relationship at a time.

For a more detailed discussion of the biblical texts and differing approaches to interpretation, see the manuscript of the Information Seminar.

The Study Group believes the vast majority of Wilshire's members today fall within Viewpoints B or C or somewhere in between. It bears noting that in the past, Wilshire—like most Baptist churches in America—would have primarily been populated with the A and B viewpoints. Advancements in understanding medical science and genetics, and increasing experience with friends and family members who identify within the LGBT spectrum, have worked to shift the balance within the congregation to a more centrist position. No members of the Study Group have expressed identity with Viewpoint A or Viewpoint D.

A majority of the Study Group has concluded that Viewpoint C most nearly reflects biblical teaching and leads to the appropriate Christian response when considering issues related to limitations and restrictions placed on participation by LGBT persons in the life of the church based solely on their LGBT status. As noted above, and accurately pointed out in the Minority Report, in those instances where same-sex sexual relations are expressly addressed in Scripture, the texts are generally prohibitive in nature. A majority of the Study Group believes that the biblical texts most often cited as condemning homosexuality may or should be interpreted as prohibitions against excessive lust, abusive relationships, pederasty and prostitution, reflecting the culture and context of the time that the Scriptures were written. These prohibitions should be honored and not ignored. Interpretations from respected theologians have supported the thinking

that these texts do not address or prohibit the kind of loving same-sex relations known in our culture today.

The Minority Report, aligning itself with Viewpoint B, concludes that all homosexual behavior in all contexts is sinful and cites these same biblical prohibitions as conclusively answering that threshold question. There will be those in the congregation who also identify with this viewpoint.

It has been important to all members of the Study Group that in our deliberations and in the conclusions reached we treat each other (and all members of the Wilshire congregation regardless of their position on these issues) with love and respect. Both the majority and minority have used a similar analytical methodology but arrived at different conclusions. Although the Minority Report cites numerous scriptural references and the manuscript of the Information Seminars is filled with pages of scholarly scriptural discussion, the minority begins its analysis with the “forest and not the trees,” summarizing what it terms the “overarching narrative of Scripture.” The majority applauds that approach, as the majority also relies heavily on its view of the overarching narrative of Scripture in reaching its own conclusions. As it turns out, the majority and the minority may simply be seeing the forest differently, resulting in differing views of the overarching narrative of Scripture and how to discern that narrative from Scripture. While we understand and respect the views of the minority, we disagree.

The Minority Report quotes a historic Baptist distinctive called “Sufficiency of Scripture with Christ as Hermeneutic” from the Wilshire website. It states:

“The Bible is the supreme theological determinant of our beliefs. All creeds or statements of belief, including this one, are secondary to, and should be examined in light, of Scripture. *The appropriate lens through which we understand Scripture is the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Scripture cannot be interpreted independently of either Jesus Christ or the guidance of the Holy Spirit.*”
(Emphasis added)

The Minority Report appears to be most heavily focused on the first sentence of the above-quoted distinctive. The majority fully subscribes to the first sentence but looks to the last two sentences to guide and direct the discernment process. We have concluded that the overall trajectory of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ is one of redemption and inclusion rather than one of judgment and exclusion. The Jesus we know from Scripture reached out to the marginalized and the outcast. Would he not act in a similar fashion if he were confronted with our questions?

One of our shared concerns has been a desire to create a biblically-based, consistent sexual ethic within the church. We believe the way of Christ teaches us to embrace committed, faithful, monogamous relationships and to avoid all forms of fornication and adultery. If we believe that those with same-sex attraction have not chosen this attraction—the majority view within the Study Group—then we must assume one of two things: (1) All those with same-sex attraction are therefore called to lives of celibacy; or (2) A path must be created for those with same-sex attraction to be part of loving, committed relationships, ideally through spiritual unions such as marriage. While a minority within the Study Group believes same-sex attraction must always be

accompanied with celibacy, the majority sees celibacy as a spiritual calling that not all people—in fact, few people—have. The majority, therefore, favor the second option of finding a path for committed relationships, ideally marriage.

All members of the Study Group endorse the following statements regarding marriage:

- Celibacy in singleness is a spiritual virtue that should be celebrated within the community of faith and should be considered by every person before contemplating marriage, as this gift from God for the sake of Christian service is the example of Jesus and the preference of Paul in the New Testament.
- Baptists do not view marriage as a sacrament that conveys any special grace to the participants or grants a position of spiritual superiority in the community of faith over single persons.
- Those who marry should do so because they feel spiritually called to commit themselves to a lifelong covenantal relationship of faithfulness that serves to perfect the human desire for intimacy with another person through committed mutual and reciprocal love.
- The possibility of children coming into the world through the love of a married couple is a gift of God that should be welcomed and celebrated in the church, but married couples who do not bear their own children, yet exercise Christian hospitality through foster parenting, adoption and/or caring for other people's children as a spiritual calling, should also be celebrated.
- Many marriages that are founded on godly love are chiefly about companionship as a fulfillment of the created intent of God that humans should not be alone. These marriages also may be generative and creative in ways that bless the world, apart from child-bearing or child-rearing.

A majority of the Study Group believes that all the above principles apply to monogamous, committed same-sex relationships as well as traditional marriages between heterosexual persons. While the language of marriage traditionally has been limited to male-female unions, and some churches have called the spiritual unions they have sanctioned between same-sexed persons “blessings” or ceremonies of “civil unions,” the language of “marriage” is coming to be equally applied in legal and common parlance today. The majority view is that covenantal relationships blessed by the church should bear the name of marriage equally for different-gender and same-sex persons. The minority view of the Study Group is the traditional position of the church that marriage is uniquely a union between male and female.

Recommendations

Based on these findings regarding the foundational questions identified by the Study Group, a majority of the Study Group recommends to the deacons that Wilshire Baptist Church not adopt any practice or policy that would differentiate or distinguish among members on any basis other

than spiritual fitness. That is, that LGBT members be entitled to participate in the life of the church on the same basis as any other member.

Answers to Four Questions

Accordingly, a majority of the Study Group recommends that each of the four questions assigned to it for study be answered in the negative.

1. Leadership Positions (including clergy). Each Wilshire committee responsible for selecting deacons, clergy, pastoral residents and other church leadership, including candidates for ordination to the gospel ministry, should evaluate all candidates on their individual merits, as is currently the case, prayerfully guided by the Holy Spirit. Wilshire has placed great trust through the years in its committees and governing structures. We believe those groups are fully capable of evaluating and recommending candidates for deacon service, for congregational leadership and for ordination. We do not see a need to impose any further instruction on these processes, since Wilshire's bylaws provide no limitations other than the wisdom of the nominating bodies. Specifically regarding deacons, we believe the deacon body should be as representative as possible of the congregation; since Wilshire has LGBT members, it should be reasonable to expect that we might also have LGBT deacons. This should not, however, be interpreted as a call for quotas, as this has never been and should not be the policy of the church's idea of representation.

While the majority view of the Study Group does not see celibacy as a requirement for someone with same-sex attraction to serve as a deacon, we do believe faithful monogamous relationships should be a requirement for ordination. The minority within the Study Group believes deacons with same-sex orientation should be allowed, provided they are celibate. With this caveat, no one in the Study Group opposed ordaining LGBT deacons.

2. Child Dedications. We believe child dedications at Wilshire are as much about the church's responsibility to nurture and support the child being dedicated as they are about the commitments being made by the parent(s). A majority of the Study Group, therefore, recommends that child dedications be offered for children of Wilshire members without regard to sexual orientation or gender identity of the parent(s). Because the Wilshire congregation makes a significant commitment in each baby dedication, the Study Group recommends continuation of the current practice of not dedicating children of persons who are not Wilshire members. The appropriateness of each requested baby dedication is currently left to the discretion of the ministerial staff. The Study Group recommends that this current practice be continued on the same basis described above.

3. Weddings. The Study Group acknowledges that this has been the issue generating the most angst within the congregation, as emotions run especially high on the issue of marriage, specifically the question of marriage ceremonies in Wilshire's Sanctuary or Chapel, and to a lesser extent, participation in marriage ceremonies, wherever located, officiated by members of Wilshire's ministerial staff. The majority of the Study Group, while supporting the ideal of full inclusion on the issue of marriage, including marriage ceremonies at Wilshire, gave consideration to compromise on this issue for the sake of unity in the church by recommending

that same-sex weddings not take place at Wilshire. In the end, however, a problem of consistency and intellectual integrity informed the majority's decision to recommend full inclusion. If Wilshire expects heterosexuals and homosexuals alike to adhere to a standard of sexual relationship only within the context of marriage, it would be inherently inconsistent with that position to close the door to marriage for those with same-sex attraction, since such unions are legal in the United States. Moreover, if a heterosexual couple is entitled to be married in the church but a homosexual couple is not, have we not created two classes of membership? One of the hopes of the Study Group is to help Christians understand that same-sex attraction does not inherently translate into promiscuous behavior or a certain "lifestyle." Ironically, to withhold marriage from same-sexed persons would effectively undermine these recommendations by consigning LGBT persons to mandatory celibacy or leaving them to the insecurity of non-covenantal forms of intimacy.

It is the current practice of Wilshire clergy to consider four things before conducting a ceremony:

- Has the couple engaged in premarital counseling either with a Wilshire minister or with someone approved by a Wilshire minister?
- Is the couple willing to make a lifetime commitment to each other?
- Will this be a spiritual wedding, in which God's name is invoked and vows are made, and not just a civil or secular ceremony?
- Does the proposed officiating minister sense in this couple a readiness and capacity to keep the commitments they will make?

The majority of the Study Group recommends that this practice continue. Each Wilshire minister should be given the freedom to be prayerfully guided by the Holy Spirit about whether to participate in or preside over any marriage, whether of different-sex or same-sex couples, thus respecting the conscience of the minister while not prohibiting any from marrying under the leadership of another willing minister.

Policy Statement

Currently there is nothing in the Wilshire Bylaws one way or another regarding matters of sexual orientation or gender identity. There is nothing in the Study Group's majority recommendations, if adopted, that would require any such inclusion. The Study Group, therefore, is not recommending an amendment to the Bylaws. It might be desirable, however, to memorialize the work of the Study Group and to make expressly clear the position of Wilshire Baptist Church to adopt a statement of policy to be published in a manner similar to other such statements regarding church policy. A suggested statement might read as follows:

“Wilshire Baptist Church is called to minister equally to all persons, extending to them the privileges afforded to any follower of Christ, including, but not limited to, membership, leadership, ordination and marriage, and will not differentiate among members on any basis save for spiritual fitness.”

Conclusion

The Study Group is mindful of the fact that, if adopted, the recommendations of the Study Group will set Wilshire apart from many Baptist churches in Texas and in the country. Moreover, the recommendations contained in this report are contrary to the desires of a minority of the Study Group itself and some members of the congregation.

Despite some opinion to the contrary, a majority of the Study Group found a more expressly inclusive approach to be more compelling. If Jesus has commanded us to love one another *just as he has loved us*, can we truly love another child of God in that way by offering only conditional acceptance and participation in our community of faith?

While the Minority Report takes exception to the language of “inclusion” and denies that its views are “exclusionary,” it is undeniable that the church’s traditional stance of welcoming LGBT persons into the church as members but limiting their participation due to sexual orientation or gender identity has resulted in an *experience* of exclusion of LGBT persons from the full life and ministry of the church, whether intended or not. If Wilshire is to be a bold witness to the way of Christ in our time, can it do so by following policies and practices that drive people away from the church, even if only inadvertently so? Is such a witness credible if the church through its policies and practices singles out for judgment the perceived transgressions of a special class of individuals while sparing all other sinners similar treatment?

In his book, *A Letter to My Congregation*, explaining his migration from the church’s traditional view to a more open and accepting position, Pastor Ken Wilson reports his answer to a young woman involved in a same-sex relationship who approached him about being baptized in his church:

“I’ve been wrestling with this question for some time now. When the Scripture addresses same-sex issues, the texts are uniformly negative. I’ve concluded one of two things is the case. One, there is a reasonable case to be made that what the texts are addressing is something other than today’s monogamous relationships between two people committed to each other for life. Another possibility is that the traditional reading is correct. Even then, we accept people who violate other biblical standards, like remarriage after divorce. We make accommodations because it seems like the right thing to do, all things considered. At the end of the day, these seem like debatable issues. We can agree to disagree. We are ultimately accountable to God for our actions. We can accept each other without approving each other’s moral standing on this or that issue. God does, or we couldn’t be saved. That’s the gospel, isn’t it?”

Wilson’s “debatable issues” make reference to a dispute within the early church about whether it was proper to eat certain foods traditionally deemed unclean by the Jews or to observe certain days considered by the Jews to be sacred. In Romans 14 and 15, Paul observes that it is not necessary for there to be unanimity within the church on these issues. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat

everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them, and all will stand before God's judgment seat. Paul admonished all to make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. If the early followers of Jesus had not been able to break with tradition on these and other issues to follow the way of Christ, we would not exist as a Christian church today.

Despite much study, prayer and conversation, there remain disagreements among Wilshire members with respect to homosexuality. At the same time, there is also much common ground. Areas of general consensus seem to include:

- A strong desire for Wilshire not to become, or to be perceived as, a “one-issue church.”
- A genuine desire to continue to love *all* people regardless of differences in viewpoints as to how such love is best expressed.
- A deep respect for the authority of Scripture, regardless of differences in interpretation.
- An abiding desire to be a “community of faith shaped by the Spirit of Jesus Christ” and a community that seeks to live out “the way of Christ in our time.”

The majority of the Study Group firmly believes Wilshire is the kind of community where individuals are comfortable questioning and respectfully disagreeing with each other and ministry staff on matters of biblical interpretation or church practice while “remaining church together”—as a powerful witness to God's work in the world amidst our imperfections. Being that kind of community will require humility and grace on the part of all members and a forbearance to see that people of genuine faith understand human sexuality and interpret pertinent biblical teaching differently.

The Minority Report contains a similar statement of fundamental principles. With one exception (that is, the statement that marriage is designed by God to be between a man and a woman), the majority wholeheartedly endorses the minority's statement of principles, particularly the last one:

“In matters where we disagree ..., we (a) encourage each other to seek the truth of the Scripture as it is the ‘supreme theological determinant of our beliefs’; and (b) acknowledge that each of us is responsible for our own relationship with God. We will strive to create a respectful, safe, accepting and loving space for each of us to seek and live out what we believe is God's will for our lives.”

Let us strive to do so *together*.

**WILSHIRE BAPTIST CHURCH
INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY STUDY GROUP**

**MINORITY REPORT
TO THE DEACONS
June 30, 2016**

The Study Group's mission was clearly identified as thoughtful analysis, study and dialogue on the issue of sexual orientation for the purpose of answering the following four questions:

- (1) What limitations, if any, should be placed on deacon service and other leadership roles in the church?
- (2) What limitations, if any, should be placed on ordination to the gospel ministry?
- (3) What limitations, if any, should be placed on marriages performed at Wilshire and/or officiated by Wilshire staff members?
- (4) What limitations, if any, should be placed on family dedications performed at Wilshire?

Summary

We believe answers to the questions relating to deacons, clergy, marriage and family dedications are determined by whether one views homosexual conduct as sinful in all situations. The primary argument of the Majority Report is that Scripture does not specifically prohibit homosexual behavior within the context of a loving, committed, same-sex marriage. After our thorough study of Scripture and various books on issues related to LGBT individuals, the minority recommends that Wilshire adopt an official position that maintains two long-standing beliefs of the Christian church (and presumably the unspoken position of Wilshire):

- (1) That marriage is intended by God to be between one man and one woman.
- (2) That all sexual behavior outside of marriage is sinful.

In our view, Scripture does not offer sufficient evidence to support changing the belief that marriage is intended to be between one man and one woman. We are not persuaded by the arguments set forth by the majority. Although their view might seem more compassionate and culturally acceptable, this position is inconsistent with the overarching narrative of Scripture and the ministry of Christ. In our view, the Bible is completely consistent on this matter. Our desire is to trust that God's view as revealed by Scripture is the most loving position.

In light of our shared belief in the sufficiency of Scripture, the following principles summarize the views of the minority group:

- (1) All people are created in God's image and should be welcomed and loved at Wilshire.
- (2) As Christians, we are called to love God and love others. We love God through obedience, which results in the joy of living in God's goodness. Within the body of Christ, loving others includes encouragement, edification, exhortation and

admonishment for the purpose of drawing each other into closer fellowship with God.

- (3) We are of great worth to God regardless of our marital status. As described in Scripture, unmarried Christians have the opportunity to focus on the things of the Lord.
- (4) Sexual attraction, whether an attraction to the same sex or the opposite sex, is not in and of itself sinful. As Christians, we are called to follow a sexual ethic in which sexual behavior outside of marriage is sinful.
- (5) Marriage is designed by God to be between a man and a woman.
- (6) In matters where we disagree, including but not limited to any of the previous statements, we (a) encourage each other to seek the truth of Scripture, as it is the “supreme theological determinant of our beliefs” (Wilshire website); and (b) acknowledge that each of us is responsible for our own relationship with God. We will strive together to create a respectful, safe, accepting, and loving space for each of us to seek and live out what we believe is God’s will for our lives.

The sticking point for the minority group in accepting the majority position is in our answer to the question: Is homosexual behavior, in all contexts, sinful? As stated above, the answer to this question informs the answer to the four questions posed to the Study Group about policies related to deacons, clergy, marriage and family dedications.

Threshold Question:
Is homosexual behavior, in all contexts, sinful?

We begin exploring the question of whether or not homosexual behavior is sinful in any context by carefully examining Scripture and then considering Scripture in light of tradition, science and experience. We begin with a focus on sexuality and marriage within the narrative of Scripture.

A. Sexuality and Marriage within the Narrative of Scripture

Rather than beginning with the verses that deal specifically with homosexual behavior, we summarize the overarching narrative of Scripture because we believe God’s design for sexuality and marriage is consistent throughout Scripture and the specific prohibitions against homosexuality cannot be understood without that context. In other words, we begin with the “forest and not the trees.”

The Bible is not a book of rules but is a book that reveals God. This is one of the core beliefs listed on Wilshire’s website: “The Bible contains the specific revelation of God, making clear God’s hope for restoration.” This is why our view may be embraced by those who hold a range of views of Scripture, from conservative to liberal.

The story of the Bible may be summed up in four acts: creation, rebellion, redemption and perfection (see pages 103-114; Shaw, 2015).

- **Creation** reveals that (a) God created sexuality and it was part of God’s perfect creation, (b) human beings are created in God’s image, (c) men and women are different, (d) God

desired men and women to have children, (e) God did not want men and women to be alone, (f) marriage is between a man and a woman, and (g) marriage includes a sexual union. Importantly, Jesus based his sexual ethics on the truths of Genesis, when he quoted from Genesis saying that God made male and female and the two become one flesh and that man should not separate what God has joined together (see Matthew 19 and Mark 10). Although polygamy is certainly found in the Old Testament and was common in Jesus' day, Jesus clearly believed that marriage between one man and one woman as portrayed in Genesis was relevant after many years and cultural changes. This relates to the "historic Baptist distinctive" located on Wilshire's website that states:

"Sufficiency of Scripture with Christ as Hermeneutic. The Bible is the supreme theological determinant of our beliefs. All creeds or statements of belief, including this one, are secondary to, and should be examined in light of, Scripture. The appropriate lens through which we understand Scripture is the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Scripture cannot be interpreted independently of either Jesus Christ or the guidance of the Holy Spirit."

Paul also quotes Genesis in Ephesians 5:21-33, clearly identifying marriage as between one man and one woman. Hays, a theologian, states in his well-respected chapter on homosexuality, "Scripture affirms repeatedly that God has made man and woman for one another and that our sexual desires rightly find fulfillment within heterosexual marriage" (Hays, p. 390; See, for instance, Mark 10:2-9, 1 Corinthians 7:1-9, Ephesians 5:21-33, Song of Solomon.)

- **Rebellion** occurs in Genesis 3, as Adam and Eve disobeyed God, resulting in the marring of human relationships, including sexual relationships, and the marring of our relationship with God. We all see ourselves in Adam and Eve, acknowledging that they represent all of us.
- **Redemption** is the focus of the rest of the Bible. The Old Testament points toward Christ, and the New Testament tells the story of Christ and the early Christian church. Romans 7 explains that the law reveals our sin and that even though we are now righteous in Christ, we continue to live with our fallen sin nature and struggle with temptation, including sexual temptation.
- **Perfection** will occur when creation is restored. Jesus explains in Mark 2 that in the resurrection we will "neither marry nor be given in marriage." In Ephesians 5, Paul refers to the mystery of the marriage of Christ and the church. Marriage is used throughout Scripture as a way to illustrate to us the depth of God's love for us (see Shaw, pages 61-71; Ezekiel 16; Hosea 1-3; Matthew 9:15; John 3:28-29; Ephesians 5). Ultimately, Revelation describes a new heaven and a new earth in which we are again referred to as the bride of Christ (Revelation 19, 21 and 22). In the resurrection, we will not be married to each other, but to Christ.

These “acts” are represented in two of Wilshire’s core beliefs (see Wilshire website):

- “Humanity sinned and is fallen. Although created in the image of God, humanity fell from fellowship with God through sin: the continuing choice of all men and women to disregard God’s will in favor of their own desires. Because of their choice, men and women are incomplete in every aspect of personhood.”
- “Sin can be forgiven and, consistent with God’s intention, creation can return to fellowship with God. Through sending Jesus Christ and as a result of Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection, God has provided the means for sin to be forgiven and for creation to be redeemed to eternal fellowship with God. Despite humanity’s corruption of God’s perfect creation, God maintains a longing to restore creation and all of humanity to a perfect relationship that will continue in perpetuity.”

When viewed within the overall redemption story, the specific prohibitions against homosexual behavior fit logically and represent a consistent view of God’s intention for sex within heterosexual marriage (some of these are discussed in more detail in the Response to the Majority Report section of this report). Sex outside of marriage and sexual behavior between two people of the same sex do not fit within God’s intended creation. Nowhere in Scripture is there any mention of homosexual marriage, and where sexual relations between people of the same sex are mentioned, it is, without exception, viewed negatively. In summary, when we look at the “forest of Scripture and not just the trees,” we believe the most reasonable conclusion is that God’s intended design of marriage is one man and one woman.

B. Tradition

Scripture also should be read in light of tradition. For approximately 2,000 years, Christians have broadly and consistently maintained that homosexual behavior is outside of the will of God. It has only been within the last approximately three decades that serious questions have been raised about this teaching. Unlike many other controversial subjects, tradition is remarkably consistent. The church across centuries, cultures and major divisions has unanimously viewed homosexual behavior as sinful. One has to ask why it is that the majority has endorsed a new interpretation of Scripture that purports that homosexual behavior within the confines of same-sex marriage is consonant with Scripture. As Tim Keller, author of *Reason to Believe* and pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian in New York City, writes:

“It is hard not to wonder if many now have new cultural spectacles on, having a strong predisposition to find in these [biblical] texts evidence for the views they already hold. What are those cultural spectacles? The reason that homosexual relationships make so much more sense to people today than in previous times is because they have absorbed late modern Western culture’s narratives about the human life. Our society presses its members to believe ‘you have to be yourself,’ that sexual desires are crucial to personal identity, that any curbing of strong sexual desires leads to psychological damage, and that individuals should be free to live as they alone see fit.” (Keller, 2015, p. 6)

The church must be wary of being compelled to adjust its teaching to be culturally relevant. We must take seriously the beliefs of theologians and Christian leaders across the centuries, including more recent leaders such as Billy Graham, C.S. Lewis, and N.T. Wright, who all considered there to be no doubt that homosexual behavior is contrary to the will of God.

C. Science

Proponents of a more affirming approach to the LGBT issue seem to base much of their rationale on the notion that sexuality is fixed primarily by nature or genetics. In fact, the American Psychiatric Association states:

“... the causes of sexual orientation (whether homosexual or heterosexual) are not known at this time and likely are multifactorial including biological and behavioral roots which may vary between different individuals and may even vary over time.”

The majority view has acknowledged that sexuality is fluid (i.e., may vary over time), particularly among women, which is strong evidence that there are factors at play other than orientation. Nonetheless, even if one assumes that sexuality is primarily genetically based, this would not, in and of itself, determine the issue of whether homosexual behavior is sinful, nor would it inform the answers to the questions posed to the Study Group. It seems to the minority that the crux of the argument posed by the majority is the notion that it would be unfair to place limitations on a person who is born with a genetic predisposition to homosexuality. Christian ethics do not hold that all inborn traits are good and desirable.

In fact, there are many natural desires that should not be acted upon, and all Christians, straight or gay, must suppress their natural inclination toward sinful behavior. For example, heterosexual men often express desires for multiple partners, yet to act on such desires would be in violation of the expressed will of God. Likewise, Christians agree that abstaining from sexual behavior before marriage is challenging. Some single Christians are unable to find a suitable partner, yet the expectation of celibacy remains. This is also the case for widows and widowers. Nothing in Scripture supports the idea that biblical interpretation should be made according to our modern cultural view of what is fair and unfair. As N.T. Wright (June 2014) explains:

“We need to remind ourselves that the entire biblical sexual ethic is deeply counterintuitive. All human beings some of the time, and some human beings most of the time, have deep heartfelt longings for kinds of sexual intimacy or gratification (multiple partners, pornography, whatever) which do not reflect the Creator’s best intentions for His human creatures. ... Sexual restraint is mandatory for all, difficult for most, extremely challenging for some.”

Even if one accepts the view that sexual orientation is innate, it is simply not a valid reason for drawing the conclusion that homosexual behavior is, therefore, God’s intention. It is important to note that minority view does not demand change in orientation or necessarily expect change.

D. Experience

Those of us who have the minority view, like those in the majority view, have many positive relationships with people who identify as homosexual. We acknowledge that these experiences are emotionally compelling. These experiences have led us and many others to more carefully review Scripture as it relates to the issue of homosexuality.

In essence, the question is whether the emotional pull of relationship, along with the undeniable need for compassion and understanding, is sufficient to overlook what we believe is a scriptural prohibition against same-sex sexual behavior. While those of us who hold the more traditional view on this issue do not claim to understand exactly why God has mandated against all same-sex behavior, or why some would be born with sexual desires that foreclose opportunities of intimacy and family, we cannot justify reaching a different result on that basis alone. However, even with a belief premised on Scripture, we are not without doubts or questions. Prohibitions based on same-sex behavior can seem unfair, especially if orientation is believed to be innate. As with so many issues confronting us in today's society, we try our best to trust that God's design and plan is far greater than our own human understanding.

Response to Majority View

The members of the minority view take exception to the words "inclusion" and "exclusionary" used in the Majority Report. This language strongly indicates that those who disagree with the majority view are discriminatory. This implication would be emphasized even further with the adoption of the statement recommended by the majority (see page 10 of the Majority Report).

Also, the language used to phrase the four questions creates an interpretive framework that is more akin to a civil rights analysis than one centered on biblical and theological principles. The position of the majority is that limiting participation of LGBT persons results in an experience of exclusion, whether intended or not. Using this rationale, we are also not welcoming of those who engage in other sins (that we all agree are sins, such as heterosexual intercourse outside of marriage) when we do not recommend them to be deacons or clergy. This argument forces those of us who believe that Scripture as viewed through the ministry of Christ teaches that marriage is between one man and one woman (and, therefore, that homosexual behavior is sinful) to either deny that teaching or be viewed as exclusionary. In other words, either we endorse something we believe God views as sinful or we are being exclusionary and discriminatory. This is a false choice.

Sadly, accepting the majority position would put those of us in the minority in the uncomfortable position of endorsing something we sincerely believe is sinful. None of us in either the minority or the majority view believe that endorsing sin is loving. If it is sinful, then it is not good for us. The difference between the majority and the minority is that we believe Scripture teaches marriage is between a man and a woman.

We actually agree with the majority that homosexual sin should not be singled out. Our view is that it should be treated the same way as any other sin. Again, our difference is that we view homosexual behavior (not same-sex attraction) in any context as sinful. We believe in-depth

dialogue is needed on this issue to determine how to be welcoming of all people, even when we have such fundamental disagreements.

Another argument made by the majority is that the prohibitions in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 no longer apply today. However, the New Testament provides us guidance. Jesus and Paul specifically reference the Genesis description of marriage being between one man and one woman. Paul, in both 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-11 uses the word *arsenokoitai*, which he coined and is a combination of the words used in Leviticus in the Greek Old Testament (Hays). As Hays explains, “Paul’s use of the term presupposes and reaffirms the holiness code’s condemnation of homosexual acts. ... Paul simply assumes that his readers will share his conviction that those who indulge in homosexual activity are ‘wrongdoers’... along with the other sorts of offenders in his list” (Hays, p. 382). Hays’ view is consistent with the picture of marriage held by Christ and Paul.

The majority asserts that the New Testament prohibitions against homosexual conduct do not refer to loving, committed same-sex relationships because these were not imagined by biblical authors (see Information Seminar). Instead, the majority suggest that these prohibitions referred to excessive lust, temple prostitution or pederasty. There are several problems with this theory, but most importantly, it is inconsistent with the overarching narrative of Scripture and Christ’s teaching about marriage being between a man and a woman, as discussed previously.

Keller points out that in the clearest passage prohibiting homosexual behavior (Romans 1:26), Paul describes homosexual behavior (men with men; women with women), saying they “burned in their desire toward one another,” indicating mutuality, not rape, prostitution nor pederasty. As Keller indicates, Paul could have used terms in Romans 1 that specifically designated those practices, but he did not. Further, reputable scholars have provided strong evidence that ancients recognized the phenomenon that some people inherently experienced same-sex attraction. For example, Aristophanes tells a story about how Zeus split humans in half and some sought to reunite to the opposite sex while others sought to reunite to the same sex. This was a clear effort at explaining the phenomenon of same-sex attraction. Bernadette Brooten, a professor at Brandeis University who studies sexuality in ancient times, describes attempts of ancients to explain causes of sexual orientation through astrology or biology (2000). N.T. Wright also agrees, saying, “Monogamous life-long same-sex relationships were known in the ancient world as well as the modern, despite what people sometimes say” (Merritt, 2014).

The majority view also points to other positions within the Christian church that have changed over time, such as views regarding slavery, women in leadership and divorce. Views on these issues are equivocal in Scripture, and disagreements about them among Christians have been substantial. For example, slavery in the 19th century was highly controversial, with many Protestants condemning it as being entirely against Scripture. A thorough understanding of biblical contexts reveals that both slaves and women were poorly esteemed and viewed as property in the culture at the time the Scriptures were written. However, in both the Old and New Testaments, women and slaves were regarded as having sacred worth (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 24:22; Proverbs 19:14; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 6:9; 1 Cor. 6:15-20). In the Old Testament women purchased land and engaged in commerce (Proverbs 31:16-24). Throughout Scripture, there are examples of women in leadership (e.g., Deborah in Judges 4, Huldah in 2

Kings 22:14-20, Priscilla in Acts 18:26, Phoebe and Junias in Romans 16). Many believe Phoebe held an official position as a deaconess. The level of disagreement and scriptural support for modern views on these issues is in sharp contrast to the consistent view within Scripture of homosexual behavior as sinful. Unlike these issues, Scripture is without exception consistent in its condemnation of homosexual practice.

The majority view also compares this issue to the acceptance of Gentiles in Scripture. They posit that we should not discriminate against those who are homosexual for the same reasons that the Jews came to accept those who were Gentiles. In this case, the Jewish Christians made observations about the Gentiles and then examined Scripture in light of those observations. They did not use experience as an authority independent of Scripture. Through examination of Scripture, the early Christians recognized the “clear message of God’s intent, from the covenant with Abraham forward, to bless all nations and to bring Gentiles to worship Israel’s God” (Hays, p. 399). Specific examples include places in Scripture that describe faithful Gentiles, and a Gentile is even in the lineage of Christ. The analogy breaks down in other ways as well. For example, the Bible condemns homosexual behavior, not a state of being. Also, the Hebrew Bible or Greek Septuagint was not unequivocally opposed to Gentiles. Usually, when speaking pejoratively of Gentiles, Scripture was referring to worship of foreign gods, immoral conduct or the oppression of Israel by Gentile nations. Gagnon concludes, “Thus there were plenty of texts in the Scripture of Jewish Christians that would lend support to a gentile mission” (Gagnon, p. 464). There are no texts that support homosexual behavior.

In reference to the historic Baptist distinctive (repeated below) from Wilshire’s website about Christ as hermeneutic, the Majority Report emphasizes that Jesus’ overall ministry is “one of redemption and inclusion rather than judgment and exclusion,” pointing to how Jesus “reached out to the marginalized and the outcast.”

“Sufficiency of Scripture with Christ as Hermeneutic. The Bible is the supreme theological determinant of our beliefs. All creeds or statements of belief, including this one, are secondary to, and should be examined in light of, Scripture. The appropriate lens through which we understand Scripture is the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Scripture cannot be interpreted independently of either Jesus Christ or the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”

We strongly agree with the majority group that Christians should follow the example of Christ and reach out to “the marginalized and the outcast.” However, we do not see it as logical that his ministry was one of redemption but not judgment, since these two principles work together. Without judgment there would be no need for redemption (John 5:22). Jesus’ love was characterized by mercy beyond our human understanding, but it did not overlook or approve of sin. Rather, Jesus’ ministry was all about redeeming us from the bonds of sin.

Although not in the Majority Report, we heard in the Roundtable Dialogues the concern, “Who am I to judge?” We agree this is a serious concern and none of us are deserving of the grace offered by Christ. We agree that we should not judge if by doing so we view ourselves as better than any other human being. However, this does not mean we must always affirm each other’s behavior. As Christians, we are called to judge each other. Scripture teaches that loving our

fellow Christian includes speaking the truth and bearing one another's burdens (see, for example, Romans 15:14, Galatians 6, Ephesians 4:14-16; Colossians 3:12-17; 1 Timothy 1:5). Both the majority group and the minority group agree that we should make judgments about the "spiritual fitness" of someone for leadership positions, such as deacons or clergy. The difference, again, is in what we believe Scripture teaches about marriage and homosexuality.

If homosexual behavior in any context is a sin, then Jesus would not want us to embrace it any more than he would want us to embrace any other sin. We should not "cast stones," but we must point people to the truth of Scripture and the power of God for us to live in freedom from sin (John 8:7, 34-36). This does not mean we live free from temptation and struggle (Romans 7), but that we live free from the bondage of sin. Those of us in the minority believe Scripture teaches that homosexual behavior in any context is sinful; therefore, we must, in all good conscience, show our love for all people by pointing them to forgiveness in the power available through Christ and the Holy Spirit. We believe we are viewing Scripture through the ministry of Christ. We also do not believe the Holy Spirit is going to guide us to discover new information that contradicts Scripture. Our difference with the majority opinion is that they believe homosexual behavior within a same-sex committed marriage relationship is consistent with Scripture, and we believe it is not consistent with Scripture.

Recommendations

The Study Group was asked to make recommendations regarding participation of those who identify as LGBT in leadership positions (deacons and clergy), marriage, and family dedications. We recognize that limitations are already placed on members in order to serve in leadership positions, participate in child dedications and be married within the church. Given our belief that Scripture clearly teaches that marriage is between one man and one woman and that sexual behavior outside of marriage is sinful, we believe it is necessary for the church to avoid endorsing or affirming homosexual behavior. It is our recommendation that the church honor the principles stated above when making decisions about participation in leadership and child dedications.

Therefore, limitations should be placed on deacon service, clergy, marriage and family dedications for individuals who participate in homosexual behavior. The opinion of the minority on exactly what those limitations should be is reflected in the cover letter to this report as we do not have 100 percent agreement in precisely what our policies should be. All of those in the minority (six) do agree that God intended marriage to be between one man and one woman and that homosexual behavior (not same-sex attraction) is sinful according to Scripture, although we did not all vote exactly the same on other questions.

Closing Thoughts

Study Group members who hold the minority view acknowledge that the entire group holds core concepts in common. We believe Wilshire should continue with its primary mission to build a community of faith shaped by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. We believe individuals should come to Wilshire to find Jesus and grow in their faith. Members and believers who visit Wilshire should be identified first as Christ-followers and should not be defined either by their sexual orientation

or their sexual behavior. Additionally, we desire that those in leadership continue to practice discernment by following the leading of the Holy Spirit in making decisions regarding ordination of deacons and clergy, marriage and baby dedications.

A further recommendation would be that the deacons designate a specific group of individuals who are tasked to pray for the deacon body as they continue this process. Because of the divisive nature of this issue, we acknowledge that the wisdom of man is not sufficient to move us toward a peaceful resolution of this issue. We believe the deacons will need the undergirding of the power of prayer to provide the wisdom and insight from above that will allow them to wrestle with this matter.

“But the wisdom that comes from above is first pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace” (James 3:17-18).

References

Brooten, B.J. (2000). “The Bible and Love Between Women,” *Open Hands*, 15 (3), 15–17. Retrieved from <http://www.brandeis.edu/projects/fse/christianity/essays.html>.

Gagnon, R.A.J. (2001). *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*. Nashville, Tenn.: Abington Press.

Hays, R.B. (1996). *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*. New York: Harper Collins.

Keller, T. (June, 2015). “The Bible and Same Sex Relationships: A Review Article.” *Redeemer Report*. Retrieved from http://www.redeemer.com/redeemer-report/article/the_bible_and_same_sex_relationships_a_review_article.

Merritt, J. (June 3, 2014). “N.T. Wright on Homosexuality, Science, Gender.” *Religion News Service*. Retrieved from <http://religionnews.com/2014/06/03/nt-wright-homosexuality-science-gender/>.

Shaw, E. (2015). *Same-sex Attraction and the Church: The Surprising Plausibility of the Celibate Life*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press.

<http://www.wilshirebc.org/about-wilshire/what-we-believe/>.

A Pastoral Response to the IDSG Reports
By George Mason, senior pastor
Wilshire Baptist Church
June 30, 2016

You have received both a Majority Report and a Minority Report from the Inclusion and Diversity Study Group. As you read and study and pray over these reports, there are a number of questions I suspect you will begin to ask. And most of these are questions about the practical effects of implementing either report: What would we do about this? How would we handle that?

In our congregational form of governance, the congregation discerns the will of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and there are various church leaders who represent the church in different ways: as teachers, committee members, pastors and so forth. In a church our size, most of the day-to-day administration falls to staff we have hired to guide the work of the church. And as senior pastor, I am responsible for that staff as well as for ensuring our lay committees and teams function in healthy ways.

As I have said many times before, as the pastor here I get one vote just like each of you. In matters of church decision making, every member gets one vote. This is not true in other forms of church governance, where pastors or a board of elders or a group of bishops or other bodies make most decisions on behalf of the church.

Aside from that, as pastor, I am charged with being the public face of the church and therefore inevitably gain a greater experiential base than most any church member could. The same is true in various ways for all our pastoral staff. We are the ones parents come to when they need to understand their children's spiritual development and salvation. We are the ones held accountable for the doctrinal stance of the church. We are the ones who serve on the front lines of the church's ministry. This gives me as your pastor—and all our staff members really—a unique vantage point that doesn't mean we should always get our way; but it does mean we are the ones who wake up every morning thinking about how best to do the work of the church.

All that is to say this: Whatever the church decides on the issue of responding to LGBT persons, it is your pastoral staff that will bear the most direct responsibility for interpreting and implementing the church's vision and policies. Remember that the need for clarity on this is exactly what prompted the formation of the Study Group in the first place. Our pastoral staff and our lay governing groups needed guidance on how to respond on LGBT questions. None of us believed we could make decisions on our own, notwithstanding our personal convictions.

So now we have before us two visions of what that guidance might be. And you might want to know how we as staff and lay leadership might implement either vision. Here are my best answers to those questions, based on what we know today.

Because we have a Majority Report with such a strong majority behind it, most of my comments will address implementation of the Majority Report. I will attempt to address the minority vision whenever there are notably different results. Also, I can report to you that our pastoral staff is fully supportive of the outcomes described in the Majority Report.

So, what happens next?

What happens next is up to the deacons in large measure. The Study Group has handed off its work to the deacons via the deacon officers, which is the appropriate step, since the Study Group was named by last year's deacon officers. Remember, though, that in our church governance the deacons do not function as a church council or as a bureaucratic body. Our deacons are and have been a ministry group and a sounding board, with more of an "advise and consent" role to the congregation than a legislative role. That is to say, any member of the church could ask the congregation during a regular church conference to address the IDSG report in some way, regardless of what the deacons choose to do with it. However, I believe the deacons will consider the matter forthrightly and openly and then make some recommendation to the congregation.

What if the deacons decline to take any action on the IDSG report?

Pastorally, I see this as one of the least desirable outcomes. We have had an intense and emotional conversation within the congregation for months now, and to leave these important questions unresolved would create an unhealthy vacuum. We are no longer able to abide by the previous "don't ask/don't tell" policy. Your church leadership, your pastoral staff, needs to know how to respond to real human situations. That said, the timing of when to act upon the matter is something the deacons will consider. Inevitably, some will believe that timing to be too fast and others too slow. But this is part of the wisdom they will seek.

If the majority position is adopted, how would those who identify with the minority position be treated, and vice versa?

This is the second most important question after the matter to be considered. As much as the matter itself, it will determine what kind of church we will be.

Members of the Study Group have taken great pains to try to model the kind of acceptance of different opinions we would like to see in the church. And I will tell you honestly that this has been incredibly hard. Because the belief that homosexuality is inherently sinful is so deeply held and feels like a core belief to some—and because the belief that homosexuality is not inherently sinful is so deeply held and feels like a core belief to others—it is a challenge not to create mutually exclusive positions.

At times during this process, people have sometimes spoken intemperately about those with a different view from their own. That has happened in public dialogues and in private conversations. We are human beings, and we need to recognize that in the midst of times like these we will not always be at our best. But we should give one another the benefit of the doubt that we all love our church and want the best for it.

Still, we struggle with having the right words to speak to each other without causing offense. One of my sincere hopes is that Wilshire might break through and model for the larger Christian community how to agree to disagree on something so critical. The unity of the church must be

pursued along with the mission of the church. We cannot sacrifice either one for the other. There is no expectation that those who end up in the minority of whatever vote we take should somehow change their minds to accommodate the decision of the majority. But we hope and pray that it will be possible for all to move together in a spirit of unity, not uniformity.

Let me put the challenge more directly. It may be harder for those who hold to Viewpoint B (as represented by the Minority Report) to truly believe they are welcomed by those who hold to Viewpoint C (represented by the Majority Report) because of fears that they will be perceived as unenlightened, unthoughtful or even mean. Viewpoint B, by its nature, draws some firmer lines on church practice than does Viewpoint C, but I believe the hearts of those in Viewpoint B are open and loving toward LGBT persons and they want our church to continue to be a welcoming place, even if not affirming of same-sex behavior. Neither side has a corner on the market of love and grace. It will be important for those from Viewpoint C to honestly and passionately declare to those from Viewpoint B that they are valued and respected, and to do so without any hint of dismissiveness. The challenge goes both ways, however. It will be important for those from Viewpoint B to believe and accept those pledges. They will have to work to see those who hold Viewpoint C as equally faithful to Wilshire's history and tradition of addressing difficult matters with grace, and not dismiss them as somehow alien to and disruptive of Wilshire's fellowship.

Is there some other compromise position you could envision that the Study Group did not identify?

No. If there were such a compromise position, I guarantee the Study Group would have adopted it internally and you would have that as a single report. There was a significant desire among members of the Study Group to find middle ground everyone could accept, but it seemed early on that was unlikely. Some of the Study Group continue to believe we could have worked harder to find a consensus position, but none were able to offer one that would satisfy most of the group.

How would the church's decision be explained publicly?

As you may know, the eyes of more than Texas are upon us. Because of Wilshire's status and visibility as a healthy expression of Christian faith, other churches and individuals are eager to see how we handle this difficult matter. That's just the way it is. In the spirit of transparency that has been called for in our study, the IDSG has posted all its resources publicly on the church's website. There is a page—not a highly visible page, but a public page nonetheless—where we have explained the group's work, posted our bibliography, posted the manuscripts and slideshow and video of the Information Seminar and attempted to provide current updates.

It is my expectation that when the deacons approve sharing the majority and minority reports with the full congregation—which I think is essential to do quickly—we would likewise post those two reports on the page on our website. That would be fully transparent.

Whenever the church makes any kind of decision regarding the IDSG reports, our normal pattern would be to report that in the *Tapestry*, both in its print and digital forms. That decision also

would be included on the IDSG page on the website. Now, it is not likely the IDSG page will be a permanent fixture on our website; it serves a purpose for a time as we work through these issues.

Again, as I have said multiple times, no one among us has a desire to wave a flag about LGBT issues here at Wilshire. We would, of course, hope and pray that LGBT persons would feel increasingly at home among us because of this decision, or we would not have pursued it. Those who support the Majority Report will celebrate this if the church were to adopt it. That said, we will do our part to be sensitive to the fact that one's joy might be another's sorrow. True inclusion means differences of thought and opinion in both directions.

We have no plans, no vision, no intention to change the way we present ourselves to the community and the world. If you look at our website, for example, you will find no special language added to brag about our inclusion of women in church leadership. We simply demonstrate that women are included in church leadership. I would envision the same approach on this issue.

What about the inevitable onslaught of media attention?

We can't predict how much attention Wilshire might get for taking a more inclusive stance toward the LGBT community, but our past experience indicates that we likely would get some media inquiries. And as you know, we are prepared to handle such inquiries, not only with staff expertise but also with quite a bit of expertise from lay leadership.

In recent times, media have picked up on our articles and posts and circulated them more widely than we set out to do ourselves. It is possible and maybe probable that will happen again in the wake of a church decision. It would not be our intent to prompt media attention on this matter. We would, of course, respond clearly and truthfully to any inquiries that come in. But I hope you can see from our past experiences that we would do so gently and with a compelling spirit of the love of Christ.

You might be interested to know that both First Presbyterian Church downtown and Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church have recently moved toward full inclusion of the LGBT community, including performing same-gender weddings, and to my knowledge neither church has received any media attention.

What would you do as pastor if the Majority Report were rejected, meaning in such event that the Minority Report were effectively adopted by the church?

The first thing we would have to do is get guidance from deacons about how to explicitly enact the approach of the Minority Report. Would this require a bylaw amendment or a policy statement? And what would the exact language be? Would the restrictions desired affect only weddings, or also deacon selection and baby dedications or some other combination of options? Remember that the minority within the Study Group is not homogenous on their points of dissent.

If the primary outcome were to limit or prevent same-gender weddings at Wilshire, I would be disappointed but would work to find a way to accommodate that. If the primary outcome were to embrace the overarching theological view of the Minority Report, I would have difficulty embracing that. In effect, it would put me in a dissenting position from the congregation, which for all practical purposes is where I stand today. I have been in that position before on other matters and have learned to honor the church and carry out the church's position, yet at the same time state my own view when asked. I cannot ask others to do what I am unwilling to do myself.

How concerned are you about people leaving the church over this?

As your pastor, I am always concerned when people leave the fellowship of the church. But I also have been your pastor long enough to have seen quite a number of people come and go. As the author of Ecclesiastes wrote, "To everything there is a time and a season." The nature of church life is that people journey among us for a season. Some of those seasons are really long, and some are short. We have been blessed with many who have made Wilshire their home for long seasons of life, which is a strength.

However concerned I may be about losing church members, my greater desire is for the church to be true to its mission and vision. If Wilshire is no longer the church where someone can serve the Lord with gladness, I would not beg them to stay and be miserable. No one benefits from that. Throughout the years, we have gained members who felt the need to leave other congregations, and other congregations have benefited when some have left us as well.

Our Wilshire history—all 65 years of it—shows that we tend to rebound any time we suffer a loss in membership. This has happened every time we have made significant decisions. What we also have learned from congregations elsewhere that have taken more open stances is that they lose some members but also gain some members. In recent weeks, we have had new members joining Wilshire who fully understand the matter we are deliberating.

During a recent dialogue session with other Baptists living through these questions, I was profoundly moved by the witness of a gay deacon in a North Carolina Baptist church who was ordained 18 years ago. His advice to any church considering full welcome of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons was this: "You will save more lives than you will lose church members." While that may seem like an overly dramatic statement to some, we have increasingly learned the reality of how folks in the LGBT community feel that churches have scorned and shamed them, whether that was the intent or not.

Let me be clear about this: Having been the senior pastor of Wilshire for nearly 27 years now, I have enormous gratitude for the saints who have labored faithfully and sacrificed greatly to give us the church we have inherited. Some of them are still among us. I honor them and celebrate their devotion to the Lord and the church. If any of them chooses to leave, I will grieve their loss. Period. Ultimately, though, I would want them to be in a community of faith where they could continue to serve the Lord with passion and commitment. My deepest hope is that even if they were to find themselves in the minority on this matter, they would find a way to accept that and keep the ties that bind us in Christian love. If that is no longer possible, I would hope they would find a church home where they can exercise their spiritual ministry.

Is there a way to keep the church together and not lose people over this issue?

Some have suggested that the best course of action would have been never to raise these issues and to let the church move on just the way things have been. The assumption is that no discussion would have created no departures. But we already knew that was not the case. We already have lost members and prospective members because of our indefinite position on these questions. We already have lost pastoral resident candidates because of our indefinite position on these questions.

I believe we will continue to lose members either way. If we adopt the Majority Report, we will lose some members. If we adopt the Minority Report, we will lose some members. If we do nothing, we will lose some members.

But I believe adoption of the Majority Report positions Wilshire for the most gains as we lean into the future. With our Vision 20/20 strategic plan in mind, I am concerned about having a church that is well-suited for 2020 and beyond rather than feeling comfortable in a church that is reminiscent of an earlier time. Building a church where outsiders feel welcome is an evangelistic ambition worth embracing. I hope many LGBT persons will come to faith in Jesus Christ—or renew their faith in him—and take their place in ministry in the body of Christ. If the Spirit has given them gifts to use for the sake of Christ’s church, we will be richer for their service.

Adoption of the Majority Report will result in losing some members, yes. How many? I don’t know. Probably not as many as some people predict and probably more than others guess. At the same time, adoption of the Majority Report will open the church to a broader work of the Spirit that I believe will result in long-term health.

How will Wilshire change by this decision?

One of the greatest concerns I have heard expressed throughout our study is that opening ourselves to full LGBT participation would change the makeup of the congregation, the experience of worship, the sense of community that people have known and loved. I have to say, yes, it likely will. But at the same time, Wilshire already is a dynamic, changing congregation. While we are blessed with many long-term members, we also have a huge number of newer members who know little of the glorious past. As someone who sits on the chancel every Sunday and looks out over the congregation, I can tell you the face of Wilshire has been changing for some time. We are an evolving, growing, living entity. And that’s what the church is supposed to be. It will also be our duty to educate new members on the history and tradition of our church that should always be honored.

The deeper question some seem to be asking is this: Will we be overrun suddenly with people who look different than we do, who dress differently than we do, who hold hands with people differently than we do, who cause us to be uncomfortable bringing our children or grandchildren to worship? To that question, I simply remind you that we already have gay and lesbian and bisexual people among us. We have had for a long time. And that has not rocked the church.

The second thing is to remember that we are not proposing creation of a church where one's sexual identity is the first and most important thing. Dallas already has a church like that, and we don't need to or want to compete with them. We are interested in being a church that reflects the body of Christ, gathering together to worship, learn, give and serve with all who call upon the name of the Lord. "Christ first and Christ last" should be our way of life together. While sexual orientation and gender identity should not be denied or repressed, they should be down the list of what matters when you come to church here.

My own belief is that the sooner we can create a church model in which LGBT persons are treated the same, not differently, we will be able to focus less on what divides us and more on what unites us in faith and mission.

What do you think would be the financial repercussion of adopting the Majority Report or the Minority Report?

In the long term, I believe adopting the perspective of Minority Report would have the greatest negative financial result. In the short term, adopting the Majority Report would have the greatest negative financial result. How much that would be in either case, we can't predict with certainty. Tell me exactly who is going to leave the church either way or who is going to stay but withdraw from engagement either way, and then we could calculate based on historical giving patterns of those individuals or families. Likewise, tell me who is going to join the church either way and what their giving capacity might be, and we could calculate.

We do know that a few people in the church have been withholding their tithes and offerings this calendar year, apparently in protest of the Study Group's work or as a statement of their uncertainty of support if the majority position were to be adopted. While I understand that logic, I would say that as long as one is in a covenant relationship to the church, giving is a matter of spiritual responsibility to God. Those who are being hurt by such decisions are often mission partners that have nothing to do with this discussion. Nevertheless, budgets are spending guides and they are aspirational. They reflect what we want to do together. We can only aspire to levels of mission and ministry that we are willing to give to.

What will we teach our children and youth about LGBT issues?

First, keep in mind that the primary things we teach children and youth have nothing to do with sexual identity or gender identity. We have a scope and sequence in place to ensure that children who are with us from birth through high school come to understand the full sweep of the Bible and all major themes of the Bible. These big themes include the concepts that all are created and loved by God, as well as sin, redemption and Christian discipleship.

Perhaps the most pointed question parents might want to know is whether or not Wilshire's staff and teachers will instruct children and youth that homosexuality is inherently sinful. That position is not taught at Wilshire today, and it is not the position of the Minority Report either. The difference between the Majority Report and the Minority Report is about homosexual behavior. While there are churches that teach that the sense that one is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender is a sin in and of itself, Wilshire has not been such a church.

The view of the majority within the Study Group is that we should teach older children and youth—always in age-appropriate ways—that every person is loved by God the way God has created them. The majority view is that sexual orientation and gender identity are not choices that people make about those aspects of their lives. Thus it is not helpful to preach or teach, “Hate the sin, love the sinner.”

If Wilshire adopted the view of the Minority Report, that would call for a more explicit teaching that all same-sex behavior is sinful. That is a more restrictive viewpoint than we practice today, because the current practice has been to try at all costs to avoid talking about same-sex attraction. This is one of the byproducts of our “don’t-ask/don’t-tell” policy.

Since 2008, I have asked Darren DeMent, our minister to students, to avoid the subject of homosexuality with our youth. Darren and other youth leaders have not been pleased with this request, but they have abided by it. It has been difficult to do. The reason for my request was a pastoral concern that we as a congregation were not ready to address these matters yet, and since we lacked clarity from the church on what our stance would be, it was best to leave these conversations unspoken. Again, this was a byproduct of our “don’t-ask/don’t-tell” policy.

The summer of 2008 was a significant milestone on this question because that was the year our Youth Choir took its annual mission choir tour to Boston. While there, the Youth Choir sang in a few historic churches—where they were honored to be invited to sing—that are open and affirming on the LGBT issue. There was no pro-gay agenda to planning this choir tour; selection of singing venues was based on both the historical nature of the churches and availability of places to sing. No screening was done for whether a church was pro or anti on the LGBT question. However, a small group of parents expressed concern about these singing venues and believed our youth being there was part of a larger agenda by staff to promote homosexuality. Despite our best efforts to address these concerns, several families left the church as a result.

A sticking point for these families in 2008 was that they wanted Darren and me to pledge that we would always teach their children that homosexuality is inherently sinful. We would not agree to do that, realizing there was diversity of opinion within our congregation and not wanting to take a hard-and-fast position that the church had not endorsed and likely would not endorse.

In the meantime, within the past three years, at least five young adults who grew up within our youth group have identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual. These are children I have held in my arms to dedicate, that we as a congregation have pledged to love and support, and who have nurtured their personal faith in Jesus Christ among us. Each of them has come to understand their sexual orientation in different ways, some more easily than others. While they did not grow up hearing fiery sermons at Wilshire against homosexuality, neither did they grow up hearing anything that would help them understand their own experiences. When I have counseled with these young adults and their parents, I have pledged my personal support and love for them but have not been able to express the church’s ongoing support for them. This is a tension I do not wish to continue. I want all of our members and guests to be able to bring their whole selves to church and not have to hide part of themselves in order to feel at home among us.

So what should we teach our children and youth? My hope is that we can find ways to teach that all humans are created equally in the image of God and loved by God. I hope we can teach our children respect for all people, even those who are different from us. And when youth or young adults come to understand their sexual orientation as something other than heterosexual, I hope we can have open and kind conversations with them about that.

It will not be our goal to make kids want to “turn” gay, because that is simply not the way it works. Nor would it be our desire to advocate sexual promiscuity of any kind, gay or straight. We want to teach about faithful covenantal relationships.

Within the youth group, Darren already teaches about developing a healthy, Christian sexual ethic that can be summarized as chastity before marriage and faithfulness in it. This ethic is built on the three pillars of mutuality, equality and commitment. This ethic is equally applicable to both same-sex and opposite-sex relationships, even though Darren at present does not speak of same-sex relationships. It would be easy to apply the same standards expected of opposite-sex relationships to same-sex relationships. So, Darren would not need to radically change the message being taught to youth.

With youth we currently stress and would continue to stress the benefits of waiting to enter sexual relationships more than the potential dangers. Our intention has been to approach conversations about sex from a positive position that is tied to Christian discipleship. Unfortunately, Christians have sometimes portrayed sex as something dirty that is to be avoided until suddenly it becomes clean immediately after marriage. This is inevitably confusing and leads to experiences of shame when sexual discipline is not observed, instead of the healthier sense of guilt that can be forgiven. We never have wanted to try to scare kids away from sex, because that approach simply doesn't work. At the same time, we want them to understand the desire of God for us to enjoy sexual relations within covenantal relationships as a human reflection of fully committed divine intimacy.

Would adoption of the Majority Report lead to the creation of any new LGBT-specific ministries or programs at Wilshire?

Again, there is no desire to make Wilshire into a “gay church,” as though that is our primary or even secondary identity. We want to continue to be a community of faith shaped by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. That encompasses all people and all kinds of needs. We do not currently have distinct ministries or classes for Republicans or Democrats, people who live in Lake Highlands or people who live in Lakewood, people who were baptized as Methodists or people who were baptized as Baptists. We will, however, always be open to creating care ministries that will help to strengthen and encourage people in the Christian life. If that were to mean, for example, helping parents come to terms with their LGBT children, we would certainly consider whatever ways we could help.

Will your preaching change as a result of this?

Well, some are convinced my preaching already has changed because of this. I certainly admit that I have addressed the subject directly on occasion and indirectly more often. I do think the

times we live in cause many of us to tune our ears to hear things we might not have heard 10 years ago. Culturally, we are on alert for ideas that either reinforce or challenge our views. It would not be my intent to make sexuality the focus of every sermon, because to do so would be to raise it to a level of importance that could eclipse our common identity as followers of Christ. I hope my preaching will always reflect the Apostle Paul's claim that he "preached Christ, and him crucified." That is to say, I want to preach the gospel—the good news that the kingdom of God has come among us in Jesus Christ and we must always repent in order to open ourselves to it more fully.

What do you perceive to be the difference between allowing the ordination of a gay deacon or minister, or allowing a same-gender wedding at Wilshire in concept (as proposed by the Majority Report of the Study Group) and doing so in reality at some point in the future?

This is an important practical and pastoral question. What the Study Group is proposing is a statement on policy and practice in the abstract, not with regard to any specific person. This is another reason it is wise for us to have this conversation now rather than later. If we were to ask our governing groups to make difficult decisions with actual people attached to them, the risk of personal harm and insult would be so much greater.

It is possible that the church could adopt the proposed policy language and go months or years without seeing a same-gender wedding here or ordaining a gay deacon or minister. And remember that what the Majority Report recommends is allowing our existing governance structures—the Deacon Nominating Committee, the Committee on Committees or the Pathways Advisory Committee, for example—to use their discernment about each person considered for service and to continue to evaluate each candidate for service on their own merits, apart from sexual orientation or gender identity. As for weddings conducted at Wilshire, we already have policies in place that assure screening of candidates on spiritual grounds, as well as having liturgical guidelines for ceremonies. These would not change.

How would adoption of the Majority Report affect our relationships with other denominational and mission groups?

Our primary relationship is with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which has taken no position on LGBT issues but has allowed space for its congregations to adopt a wide range of views. We anticipate no change in relationship there. Incidentally, at this year's CBF General Assembly, the Governing Council approved creation of what they are calling the Illumination Project, specifically to provide a means of seeking unity amidst questions like how to speak about the LGBT community and about CBF's own employment policy. I believe this is a positive step that corresponds with Wilshire's own efforts.

We anticipate little if any change in our relationship with our local, state and global missions partners that are not denominationally related.

The denominational partner with the greatest potential for relational disruption is the Baptist General Convention of Texas, which has taken a more restrictive stance with a few other Texas Baptist congregations. I personally have been working diligently on this relationship, not only

with staff leadership at the BGCT but also with key pastors in the state. We are hopeful of finding a way to maintain relationship.

One of the challenges embedded in this relationship is that we have a few church members who are employees of the BGCT who believe their jobs could be in jeopardy if we become more open to the LGBT community. The concern is if Wilshire were declared unilaterally by the BGCT no longer to be in “friendly cooperation,” these individuals might have to choose between their jobs and their church. (Recall that our own Jim Morrison faced the very same dilemma in 2000 when we left the Southern Baptist Convention. In that case, Jim himself actually made the motion among the deacons to separate, with full awareness of the personal consequences.) A mitigating factor is that the BGCT currently has in its employment staff members who are members of LGBT-friendly congregations and even non-Baptist congregations.

Adoption of the Majority Report would trigger our withdrawal from the Dallas Baptist Association, where we have retained a nominal membership for many years. This group uses a confession of faith, called *The Baptist Faith and Message*, as a doctrinal standard for membership. The document asserts that marriage is defined solely as being between a man and a woman. Out of respect for them and with a desire to live in peace with all, we would respectfully withdraw our membership and yet look for opportunities in the future where we might cooperate in local missions.

Could we talk about something else now?

Yes, please! It does seem like every whispered conversation over the past year has been about homosexuality. We have so many important things to talk about: our mission work, our pastoral residency program, our preschool and children’s ministries, our strategic plan, and on and on. We do not need to rush through processing the IDSG report just for the sake of being done with it, but neither do we need to linger over it and continue to be distracted from the ongoing work of the church. The ultimate goal that is that we will have all the more members fully engaged in mission, including our LGBT members.