

## **First Christian's Welcome Statement:: Frequently Asked Questions**

Following First Christian Church's Adoption of The Proposed Welcome Statement, we wanted to answer a few questions about what this means for the ministry of our congregation.

### **What does it mean to be Open and Affirming? How is the Welcome Statement related to that?**

*To be Open and Affirming means that we explicitly welcome all people to our community of faith and we affirm them as uniquely created as children of God. It also means that we welcome all people—regardless of race, gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and many other differences—into full membership and ministry of this church.*

*To be Open and Affirming means that we do not restrict anyone from Membership, Baptism, the Lord's Supper or Communion, Marriage, or candidacy for ordination into ministry based on their sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, or race, or other aspect of their identity.*

*The welcome statement, written by First Christian members who served on the Welcoming Committee with your input as an FCC member, is our church's unique expression of this welcome. The welcome statement will be shared on our website and other appropriate venues for promoting the ministry of FCC in Chattanooga. FCC will also be added to a national list of Open and Affirming Churches in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). This will help people who are looking for a welcoming church to find us.*

### **I love First Christian Church, and I don't want to lose my church. Does this Change Who First Christian Church Is?**

*If you've ever set foot in the Choir Room, you may have noticed a dedication sign. The Choir room was originally designated as "The Chapel of Brotherhood" and was dedicated to a number of men who worked for the cause of "universal brotherhood," including Mahatama Gandhi, who—if you remember your history books, worked for the rights of Indians in South Africa, Indian Independence from the British Empire, and spoke up for the Dalit population in India, those on the very lowest rung of India's rigid caste system.*

*This chapel was dedicated in the 1950s.. Racial segregation was a legal reality in our country at that time. It was also not commonplace at that time for Christians of any stripe to honor non-Christian brothers and sisters like Gandhi in the art, architecture, or design of their sacred spaces. And yet, here this dedication is.*

*Likewise, if we were building this chapel now, it would also be dedicated to the women who have worked for the sake of humanity, and certainly wouldn't be dedicated only to "brotherhood." It would also likely honor folks from other racial and religious backgrounds. There are many things that First Christian Church has been and has not been in its nearly 150 years of ministry, and there are certainly things that it has been that now seem dated—but as the inclusion of Gandhi, who practiced Hinduism, demonstrates—one thing that First Christian has aspired to be is a place that offers a generous welcome to all people, and it has done so in ways that have at times seemed radical for its time.*

*Our welcome statement is yet another expression of this tradition of welcome and affirmation of the value of all people as God's Children at First Christian Church.*

### **Our denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a non-creedal tradition. Does a welcoming statement go against that? Given that, are welcome statements truly "Disciple" in nature?**

*The Word "Creed" comes from the Latin word "Credo," which translates as "I believe," Creeds emerged in the first few centuries of the Church as relatively short, comprehensive expressions of the key provisions of Christian Faith. The founders of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) objected to the ways that creeds were used as tests of faith—inability to recite a creed, or to give an interpretation of a facet of the creed that satisfied the church's elders or clergy was used to disqualify people from receiving communion or participating in other aspects of life in the church. From our very beginning in the 19th Century, we have emphasized the role of one's individual conscience and reason in interpreting the Bible and the traditions of the Church rather than human-constructed creeds.*

*This welcome statement is not a creed. While it is theological in content—that is, it has something to say about the nature of God and people made in God’s image and the welcome we receive from Christ as his Disciples—it does not function as a statement that sets boundaries for belief. It is not used as a test for determining whether or not your beliefs are orthodox or acceptable. It will not be something that we recite in worship, as many traditions do with creeds. It functions primarily as an expression for those of us who are already part of this community to those looking for a church that, as we say each Sunday, Christ’s table and welcome are wide, and that we aspire to offer a welcome that is just as wide as Christ’s.*

*Disciples Churches are governed congregationally, and as First Christian Church, Chattanooga, we make our decisions as a unique Christian community in our unique setting. The process by which we reached this decision was developed by Disciples clergy and lay leaders, many of whom are multigenerational Disciples, and all of whom are intimately familiar with our culture, traditions and polity. It was designed in a way that reflects the centrality of the local congregation, the Disciples commitments to unity and diversity, and it emphasized the participation of each individual member and a democratic way of reaching a decision. It is a very Disciples way of making a decision.*

*Two important historic Disciples Churches—Central Christian Church in Lexington, KY (where representatives of two movements, one whose members called themselves Christians and one whose members used the title Disciples of Christ, first met) and Bethany Memorial Church in Bethany, West Virginia (which is tied to Bethany College, a Disciples-affiliated college that was pastored by Disciples founder Alexander Campbell and currently pastored by former denominational General Minister and President Sharon Watkins) are among the Open and Affirming Churches in our tradition. These historic churches are deeply proud of their identity as Disciples of Christ and Open and Affirming commitment, just as we are.*

**Don’t all these labels of people in the welcome statement divide us? Isn’t it enough to say that all are welcome?**

*Chattanooga is a city full of churches, almost all of which claim that “all are welcome.” However, not every church means the same thing when it says “All are welcome,” and that can be disappointing for someone looking for a church. It can also be painful.*

*Over the last five years, we’ve welcomed more than 60 new members to our community, and the majority of them have asked specifically about our welcome to members of the LGBTQ+ community. Sometimes people ask this because they or members of their family are part of that community, and they want to be sure that they will be able to fully participate in the life of our church. Sometimes people ask that because they identify as part of that community and have been hurt by a church that said “all are welcome” but limited how they could participate in that community. Other times, prospective members ask about LGBTQ inclusion because it’s an indicator of other values. They want a church—and want to raise their children in a church—that values inclusion of all people, regardless of race, gender, orientation or identity.*

*Our welcome statement will allow people who are looking for a church to look on our website and other promotional materials and get an idea immediately about the width of our welcome. The explicit naming of different aspects of identity helps solidify for people the idea that they are welcome here. People can look at the statement and know, without any ambiguity, that we are committed to welcoming them. We are also unambiguously telling the LGBTQ people who are already part of our community, and anyone who feels that they do not fit a particular mold that they not only matter, but they are part of the Body of Christ. If you’re already a member of First Christian Church, I hope that you are able to look at this statement and find yourself in it as well, no matter who you are, and be reminded of the warm welcome you received when you first worshipped in this place.*

**There are parts of my identity that I’m very private about. Does this welcome statement create an environment where I must announce everything about my whole self to be welcome?**

*As always, you are welcome to share as much as yourself as you feel comfortable doing, and you are encouraged to build relationships where you feel safe with members. As always, no one will be pressured to share anything—publicly or privately—that they aren’t comfortable sharing. As Always, personal matters shared with pastoral staff are kept confidential, except for when there are issues of safety or legality involved*

**My faith and theology differ from some of the things reflected in the welcome statement. Am I still welcome at First Christian Church?**

*Absolutely. Christ welcomes all to the table. You don't have to agree with everything the statement says, you don't have to agree with every line of every hymn we sing, you don't have to agree with everything that is said in a sermon or everything that you hear or read in Sunday School. You are welcome to discuss and debate differences of opinion on all matters of faith and social impact in love and grace and tolerance with one another. We are called to welcome one another. You are welcome here. Full Stop.*

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**I hope that this has helped to answer some questions for you.**

**I know that these aren't the only questions that you have. I hope that you will find some time to be in touch with me, with the leadership of our congregation, or with members of the welcoming committee.**

**Above all, know that the work of our church—to seek God's Wholeness, Expand the Table as Christ did, and nurture a spirit of justice—isn't completed now. It has only just begun. Wherever there is hunger, hurt, and hopelessness—we, as Christ's Disciples—are called to go there.**

**I am so grateful, as always, to be in ministry with you.**

**Rev. Brandon**