

Frequently Asked Questions on the Covenant Executive Board's Recommendation to Remove First Covenant Church of Minneapolis from the Roster of Covenant Churches

The Covenant Executive Board is bringing a recommendation to remove First Covenant Church of Minneapolis from the roster of Covenant churches, having found FCCM to be out of harmony with the Evangelical Covenant Church regarding human sexuality and pastoral credentialing.

The Covenant Executive Board and the ECC are mindful of the gravity, complexity, sensitivity and pain that matters of human sexuality can bring and of the weighty considerations to our community. The ECC affirms that all people are made in the image of God and are therefore valuable and loved by God. As a church, we welcome everyone and treat all with dignity. Our commitment is to lead with love and to continually seek deeper ways to care for people with greater understanding, compassion and sensitivity.

This document seeks to respectfully address some of the questions and comments we have received.

--The Executive Committee of the Covenant Executive Board

1) What is the center of the Covenant's position on human sexuality?

The Covenant is a union of churches that have mutually agreed to partner together. We have agreed to "Covenant" together. The Covenant Annual Meeting is the highest constituted authority in the ECC. Action at a previous Covenant Annual Meeting established the following biblically derived ethic as the center of the ECC's position on human sexuality: "Heterosexual marriage, faithfulness within marriage, abstinence outside of marriage—these constitute the Christian standard. When we fall short, we are invited to repent, receive the forgiveness of God, and amend our lives."

The Annual Meeting further determined "The ECC position serves as 1) our guiding statement on human sexuality and the marriage ethic and 2) the basis for ECC policy, practices and guidelines on these matters."

In serving as the basis for ECC policy, practices and guidelines, touchpoints for relevant instructions and expectations may be found in the following: Ethical Principles for Those Serving in Vocational Ministry in the ECC; personal ordination vows (which promise adherence to the ethical principles); and Guidelines for Covenant Pastors and Congregations Regarding Human Sexuality.

As noted in the guidelines, "The ECC affirms that God's boundaries, whatever the dimension of life, are meant for our flourishing...There is no intent to single out select

behavior. It is a high calling to every one of us: single, married, young, old, both genders, all orientations.” When understood correctly, the ECC position addresses each of us.

2) In what areas is FCCM out of harmony?

The Executive Board has determined that FCCM is out of harmony by contravening the ECC in five areas:

1. The ECC’s standard of marriage by eliminating its heterosexual nature;
2. The ECC’s prohibition of clergy officiating and participating at same-sex weddings;
3. The ECC’s requirement that clergy adhere to a personal behavioral standard of celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in heterosexual marriage;
4. The ECC’s expectation that congregations refrain from hosting same-sex weddings and related events; and
5. The determination of the Board of the Ordered Ministry by locally credentialing a pastor whose ECC credential was suspended for cause.

3) Can we be assured this recommendation is being made only after exhaustive engagement with FCCM?

We appreciate FCCM’s concern and care for LGBTQ individuals and communities, as well as the church’s service through other ministries. We share this concern and agree that LGBTQ people have been hurt and marginalized for too long by the Church.

We have included a timeline in the delegate notebook that details all the steps taken in this process dating back to 2014 and recounts the extensive efforts by both the Northwest Conference and the ECC to, using the language of the ECC Bylaws, “steer the congregation back into harmony.” Despite extensive interaction, FCCM has asserted its opposition to adhering to the areas identified above.

In the midst of this challenging season, we believe it is important to reiterate our concern for LGBTQ people. The Evangelical Covenant Church, being grounded in the historical doctrine of human sexuality, is firmly committed to growing in our ability to love and affirm all people as being created in God’s image and loved by God.

4) Can we be assured this recommendation is based on a thorough process, consistent with the ECC’s Constitution and Bylaw provisions?

Yes. In addition to the interactions referenced in the timeline to steer the congregation into harmony, the Bylaws call for two independent and separate reviews, one by the regional Conference Executive Board and another by the CEB. The Northwest Conference Executive Board consists of 11 voting members, elected by the Annual

Meeting of the conference. The CEB consists of 30 voting members, elected by the ECC Annual Meeting, and includes four voting liaison members from other ECC boards. FCCM exercised its right to defend itself to each board. Each of these boards independently and separately concluded FCCM to be out of harmony.

5) Isn't human sexuality a non-salvific matter over which ECC churches can disagree?

Matters of importance fall into more categories than simply salvific or non-salvific. The Covenant Confession of Faith recognizes the dimensions of faith, doctrine, and practice, reading, "The Evangelical Covenant Church confesses that the Holy Scripture, the Old and the New Testament, is the Word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct." Scripture identifies sexual practice as an important ethical matter of conduct that is vital to holiness and discipleship. The report of the Executive Board (found in the Delegate Notebook) also contains a discussion of this specific matter.

6) What about Covenant freedom?

Freedom in the Covenant is a cherished value. Yet freedom also carries responsibilities as noted in the Preamble to the Covenant Constitution, which says, "The Evangelical Covenant Church embraces this freedom in Christ as a gift that preserves personal conviction, yet guards against an individualism that disregards the centrality of the word of God and the mutual responsibilities and disciplines of the spiritual community." As referenced above, the ECC has articulated certain responsibilities and disciplines in this matter. Freedom of conviction is preserved, but action remains subject to those responsibilities and disciplines.

7) What about unity?

We care deeply about community, and unity is indeed a high value in the ECC. We agree that at all times, we must, as Ephesians 4:3 says, "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

The Covenant does not often speak definitively, but it does speak when a lack of clarity magnifies confusion that can threaten unity. For example, the Covenant Affirmations are the result of a desire for a clarified and gravitational description of Covenant identity during a tense period concerning theological direction. Similarly, the Covenant sought to bring clarity to baptismal practices, and later to the participation of women at all levels of church life and leadership. Likewise, the Annual Meeting asked for greater clarity around human sexuality for the sake of unified mission.

When the ECC speaks, it does not speak capriciously. A discerned Covenant position is derived through the deliberation and action of the Annual Meeting, at which delegate representation from every congregation is available.

8) How does our Pietist heritage relate to this process?

Pietism is the spiritual renewal movement out of which the ECC was birthed. This heritage honors the authority of Scripture, recaptures the importance of a warm, living and deeply personal faith, extends God's love to the world and respects our interaction with one another. It is intrinsic and indispensable to our ongoing identity. The ECC is committed to our Pietist heritage and its influence in arriving at duly derived and discerned positions and practices of the ECC. In this matter, it informs the dimensions of freedom, responsibility and unity that are addressed in the questions above.

9) What are the larger implications of this vote for our polity and communal life together?

When a congregation joins the Evangelical Covenant Church, it enters into the provisions which govern our common life, including the provision that the Annual Meeting is the highest constituted authority of the ECC. The Annual Meeting is where delegates (eligible from all churches) together discern items considered to be vital and differentiating for our common life. The Annual Meeting has spoken plainly on this matter.

Just as a pastor's credential is not one's own but rather extended in trust by the Covenant which both authorizes and limits aspects of its use, so a church's membership is not an inevitable right to minister under the auspices of the ECC in ways contradictory to adopted ECC positions.

If a church is consciously able to flagrantly adopt and practice the opposite of Annual Meeting decisions without accountability, while claiming to do ministry under the auspices of the ECC, the ECC loses its ability to govern itself and define itself. By extension, additional churches on this and any other matter could be emboldened to likewise locally nullify duly adopted ECC matters. The ECC at that point ceases to be a Church with order and accountability and instead becomes an ungovernable entity with no communally discerned standards and no ability to distinguish its own identity.

Conversely, as previously identified, any church may choose to voluntarily withdraw if it considers the expectations of the common life of the ECC to constrain its conscience or practice. Voluntary withdrawal can preserve relationships when pursued with mutual respect and grace.

10) How is this different from disagreement about women in ministry? What about churches who will not call a female pastor?

The ECC affirms women as called and gifted to all levels of leadership and affirms a biblical basis for the full participation of women in all ministries of the church.

This decision dates to 1976. Because it did represent a change, the ECC did not mandate immediate compliance but instead set on a path to increase congruency over time. This is not an assessment of that approach but rather a description of how this decision was implemented. We lament the inconsistency of resources and advocacy that has meant many women have not been treated with the same dignity, value and respect as their male counterparts.

The resolve to progress is present. The ECC has turned away churches who sought membership in the ECC but who were not aligned with the ECC's communally discerned position on women in ministry. Some ECC churches have voluntarily withdrawn because they were not in alignment. The ECC has turned down potential church planters who were not in alignment. Some pastors of established churches have been ineligible for ordination or have had their ordination delayed until satisfactory alignment could be demonstrated.

There may be some old church constitutions and bylaws that still speak in male-oriented language, but often these are found in historic churches that have not spent time updating their governing documents – evidence of inaction rather defiance. Superintendents actively work with churches to update governing documents when these incongruities are discovered.

Some churches are still growing in their practice of including women at all levels of leadership. Over time, in each case, these churches are growing toward greater inclusion, not away from alignment. None are publicly denigrating the ECC position.

In contrast, the ECC has only ever held one position on human sexuality and has only ever prohibited officiating at same sex weddings.

Though we are heartened by the trajectory of the number of women in pastoral ministry, we remain realistic about the work in front of us. We acknowledge that we have a lot of growing to do when it comes to ensuring called and gifted women have places to serve, especially women experiencing calls to lead pastor positions. We are committed to increasing growth and advocacy across the denomination in this area, which is vital for the benefit of the whole Covenant church.

11) Isn't a motion to remove a church from the roster unprecedented?

It may be unprecedented, but that does not mean it is unanticipated. The very inclusion of provisions in the Bylaws for this action anticipates a circumstance for removal could arise. The unprecedented nature is bi-directional. The uniqueness of the recommendation by the board is matched by the distinctiveness of the church in opting for this step.

Covenant Bylaws outline two prior options, which have been the normative way of approaching stressed relationships between a congregation, its regional conference and the ECC. The first is deep and earnest engagement with the conference and the ECC, which results in “steering back into harmony.” As the timeline shows, this route was engaged extensively between FCCM, the Northwest Conference and the ECC, but ultimately the breach was not restored as FCCM has asserted its opposition.

The second route is the voluntary withdrawal of a church from the ECC roster where a congregation, for reasons of its own—including differences of conscience with the ECC—chooses to pursue its own future apart from the ECC. In this path, a congregation is free to pursue its own future, with all its assets, unencumbered by ECC requirements and expectations. This pathway was not chosen by FCCM.

12) Could FCCM apply for membership at a later date if removed from the roster?

Yes, subject to considerations for ECC compatibility as applicable to all new and adopting churches.

13) Given the Executive Board’s recommendation, can the Covenant really say it cares about LGBTQ people?

We understand that churches, including ECC congregations, have hurt and wounded the LGBTQ community, family and friends. We share a deep concern for LGBTQ individuals and communities who have been hurt and marginalized for too long by many Christian communities. Our posture in the ECC is to lament and to do better.

We take seriously our commitment to offer pastoral care to anyone regardless of race, gender, creed, ethnic origin, socioeconomic status or sexual orientation. We do not hold this posture as a retrenchment from ministry but as a context from which we extend the love and grace of Christ. Indeed, the ECC has worked intentionally to equip pastors and churches. The ECC’s Embrace materials, found at covchurch.org/embrace, are a suite of human sexuality discipleship resources and learning experiences curated and created by the ECC’s Make and Deepen Disciples ministry area.

We know we have more to do and learn. We will continue to encounter new situations never anticipated, new complexities never envisioned and new insights from new interactions. And so the ECC will keep moving toward loving better.