

Southern Conference Committee of Twelve
Report
June 2006

The 2005 Southern Conference annual gathering in Norfolk authorized a Committee of Twelve* to study the resolution on marriage presented at that meeting, and bring a recommendation to the 2006 annual gathering of the Conference. However, since the General Synod at its meeting in Atlanta in July of 2005 passed the “Equal Marriage Rights For All” resolution, the members of the Committee of Twelve felt it was appropriate for us to deal with issues broader than the definition of marriage.

Since the passing of the “Equal Marriage Rights For All” resolution by the General Synod there has been considerable disagreement among the churches of the Southern Conference. As a result of this disagreement many local churches have felt forced to choose sides. This has resulted in significant disunity within our Conference.

Desiring a restoration of unity within our Conference, this Committee of Twelve acting as members of the Southern Conference, offer this document of *guideline* for consideration at the 2006 annual gathering of the Southern Conference. Our desire is that this be a step towards healing and reconciliation within our Conference. We move the adoption of this document as official *guideline* of the Southern Conference.

1. We recommend taking no action at this time on any of the marriage resolutions. The issues raised by the resolutions on marriage are important for many reasons. Yet, at this time, for the Southern Conference acting in its annual gathering, to take concrete action “for” or “against” any of the stated opinions would lead, not to reconciliation and growth, but to greater division and pain. Further, we call upon the General Synod, the Southern Conference, our Associations, local churches, and each other, to explore more productive ways of dealing with controversial issues than voting on resolutions that will divide rather than unify us.
2. We acknowledge there has been great pain on multiple sides. For some, the pain has been the exclusion from the rights and benefits offered others. For others, the pain is based upon a concern that historic teachings of the church are being abandoned. For yet others, the pain is in the very real division that has visited the denomination, drawing resources and time from other worthy efforts of the church.
3. We acknowledge many have felt unheard, even as many have made attempts in good faith to listen. We recognize that our strong feelings and sincere beliefs on important issues may cause us to speak harshly or without adequate thought for the pain we might visit upon our brothers and sisters by the words we choose. Regardless of our positions, we recognize that more can and should be done to ensure that we speak and act in ways that illustrate our Christian love and charity for all even while we advance the causes in which we believe.
4. We acknowledge a wide range of opinions on matters of sexuality, as well as other issues of society and theology. We admit in humility that no one of us is the ultimate Judge of these opinions, and commit ourselves to renewed efforts to follow the advice of Paul in his counsel to the Corinthians that love be the driving force in all our relationships. (I Corinthians 13:1-7).
5. We acknowledge a wide range of biblical interpretations and definitions of authority of Scripture. While we reaffirm the right of each individual and church to disagree with the interpretations of others, we also commit ourselves, individually and collectively to be respectful of such beliefs, beginning with the presumption that others in the denomination have come to such beliefs

through prayerful contemplation of Scripture and sincere efforts at the discernment of God's will.

6. We reaffirm that healing and reconciliation come from Christ. We ask God for help, through the teachings of Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit, to keep us each on the path of healing and reconciliation, even in our times of great pain and anger.
7. We, as servants desiring to be active participants in Christ's healing, recommend the following actions for the life, health and unity of the Southern Conference:
 - a. We call upon the Board of Directors of the Southern Conference to increase the opportunities for gathered worship in groups, districts, associations, and other forums.
 - b. In keeping with our polity, we reaffirm that each local church may decide for itself where it will stand on any given issue.
 - c. We recognize there must be room at the table in the Southern Conference for the diversity of voices that exist within our conference. We respect the right for each voice in the conference to be heard and valued in fair and open dialogue.
 - d. We call upon the Board of Directors of the Southern Conference to implement processes for nominations to positions within the Conference in order to ensure all voices are heard and valued in places of influence.
 - e. We call upon the Board of Directors of the Southern Conference to review the policy and procedures concerning staff evaluations to ensure these are clear, fair, and productive processes.
 - f. We call upon the Board of Directors of the Southern Conference to review and set policy concerning public statements by conference staff and leaders because such statements represent a diverse organization. We recommend that the Board of Directors review the policies of government, academia, and other large organizations for examples of policies concerning official communications and disclaimers.
 - g. We call upon planning committees for all conference and association events to be sensitive to the need for fair presentation of major points of view on controversial issues whenever those issues are addressed in public speeches, workshops, or other judicatory settings.
 - h. We encourage the Board of Directors of the Southern Conference to explore additional options for designated giving as a way in which a variety of worthy causes can be supported despite the diversity of views in the conference.
 - i. We call upon each member of the clergy, lay leadership, Conference and Association staff, and every congregation, to do all they can, individually and collectively, to increase the involvement of UCC members in the life of the denomination at the association, conference, and national levels.
 - j. We call upon all local churches to contribute to Our Church's Wider Mission as evidence of their covenantal commitment and as a sign of a new spirit of unity within the Southern Conference where we agree to disagree in the spirit of love, value one another's views, and seek above all to "proclaim the gospel to all the world."

*The Committee of Twelve was comprised of six members in favor of the resolution and six opposed to the resolution. We submit these recommendations not because we unanimously affirm all points, but in the spirit of community.

- ENCA: Dian Jackson, pastor, Vessels of Clay UCC, Elon, NC
- ENCA: Don Thompson, pastor, Shallow Well UCC, Sanford, NC
- ENCA: Doug Long, pastor, North Raleigh UCC, Raleigh, NC
- ENCA: Gaynelle Williamson, member, Melfield UCC, Haw River, NC
- ENCA: Nancy Ruth Best, interim pastor, Pilgrim UCC, Durham, NC
- EVA: Buzz Ballard, pastor, Windsor Congregational Christian Church, Windsor, VA
- EVA: Charles Chappell, pastor, Portsmouth UCC, Portsmouth, VA
- EVA: Jaimie Orr, member, Tidewater UCC, Virginia Beach, VA
- EVA: Sam Varner, interim pastor, Fellowship UCC, Chesapeake, VA
- WNCA: Bob Thompson, pastor, Corinth Reformed Church, Hickory, NC
- WNCA: John Roberts, pastor, Hedricks Grove UCC, Lexington, NC
- WNCA: Julie Peebles, pastor, Congregational UCC, Greensboro, NC

* The document by the “Committee of Twelve” was amended by delegates at the Annual Meeting of Southern Conference on June 10, 2006 to change the word ‘policy’ (appearing twice in the third paragraph) to the word ‘guideline.’ It then passed as amended.