

## MILESTONE STATEMENT ON LGBTQ+ INCLUSION

### ARTISAN CHURCH / January 2021

*May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you,  
in order to bring praise to God.*

**Romans 15:5-7**

*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.*

**Phil 2:5**

## Preamble —

This Milestone Statement (“Statement”) reflects the work of the Lead Team and Pastoral Team, who have been engaged in an ongoing Discernment Process over the past four years.

Collectively, we have reviewed dozens of books, articles, podcasts, blogs and more. We have spent countless hours in conversation: with each other, with Scripture, in prayer, with books by biblical scholars, with external experts, with the people of Artisan, with LGBTQ+<sup>1</sup> and SSA (same-sex attracted) folk within and beyond Artisan, with leaders from other churches and traditions, and others.

We offer the Milestone Statement with deep reverence for both God and our community — holding particular respect for those who will be most directly impacted by Artisan’s position here, namely those in our community who identify as LGBTQ+ and/or SSA. We acknowledge and grieve the hurt you have experienced, both in your history with the Church at large and with Artisan these past four years. With that in mind, we offer this Statement to the whole Artisan community with humility, recognizing that we are merely human beings who wrestle with the Word of God and seek to embody it in our living, breathing, and moving. We trust that in working together, the Spirit has guided our minds and conversations. We understand the “seal” of the Spirit to be the unity that has emerged in what follows.

We began with a mandate to produce a “decision statement” and have ended up with a “milestone statement”. This is important. As will become clear as you read on, we have come to a place of recognizing that the making of decisions is not the right posture in which to address differences in sexual orientation or gender identity in the Church. Decisions and statements of

---

<sup>1</sup> We use the language of LGBTQ+ to refer to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (or sometimes “Questioning”). The “+” refers to all of the communities included in Queer Community who are not captured in the LGBTQ initialism, with an acknowledgement that our understanding of the many identities along this spectrum will always be evolving, and we desire to respectfully listen as this unfolds.

approval or disapproval imply judgment of each other. A key outcome of our process has been the realization that that is a road we do not want to walk.

This Milestone Statement reflects what we are setting as Artisan policy regarding inclusion of LGBTQ+ members of our congregation in all aspects and roles within our community, and regarding marriage. The Statement is not a conclusive argument as to Scripture's teaching on human sexuality or gender identity and their expressions. In fact, as you will discover in reading further, our process has led us to recognize that ambiguity exists within Scripture and its interpretation regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. We have had to accept, at least at this point, that we have unanswered questions about which there are divergent viewpoints in the global church and in Artisan Church—even within our Lead and Pastoral Teams themselves. With that in mind, this Statement is intended to convey what will be Artisan's policy towards LGBTQ+ inclusion and our posture as a church going forward. It is not a theological defence of any particular view.

To arrive at this Statement, we set out for ourselves a 4-fold process, outlined in the headings that follow. What follows is an attempt to both “show our work” (this [supporting document](#) outlines the Engagement Process in greater detail), and, particularly in the CLARIFY section, to articulate our current way forward regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion in the life of our community.

## **We have LISTENed to the witness of Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and the congregation.**

The writer of James said, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” (James 1:19)

From the beginning, we have been asking ourselves the question, “Who will we be to one another as we approach this process?” We have endeavoured to come to this conversation with big ears—to listen with gentleness, love, grace, and courage, and to listen longer than we think necessary.

What has been the substance and fruit of our listening?

The listening work of the Lead and Pastoral Teams was focused by and culminated in six Discernment Sessions that centered on key questions such as: How do we understand Scripture's teaching on sexual ethics in general? Does Scripture seem to hold any possibility for same-sex marriage? What have the lived experiences of our LGBTQ+ siblings opened up and taught our community? How has the Spirit been speaking and guiding as we've listened to our own stories? Are we willing to break from our denominational tradition on these issues? Where might God be leading us from here?

Besides these Discernment Sessions, numerous other activities and points of connection have taken place to widen our listening beyond the Lead and Pastoral Teams.

We have met with people in Artisan Church who identify as LGBTQ+ and SSA. We have met and consulted with outside organizations such as *Generous Space*, *The Colossian Forum*, *Posture Shift*, and *ChurchClarity.com*. We have met or spoken with other pastors and leaders in Canada and the US—both within MB circles and other denominations—who are wrestling with similar questions as us. We have met with our key denominational leaders to keep them apprised of our processes, and to invite their prayers. We have met with and responded to letters from concerned Artisan partners. We also bear witness to the abundant presence of God in the lives of those people in Artisan Church and beyond, both who identify as LGBTQ+ and affirm more inclusive interpretations of Scripture and those who are SSA and affirm traditional interpretations of Scripture.

With our Facilitation Team's help, we have held two Artisan Community events that provided an invitation to help shape the Engagement Process as well as opportunities to listen to the Spirit in prayer, to hold space for stories different than our own, and to consider possible pathways forward. We so wish we could have had more of these evenings, but were limited by COVID and its necessary restrictions.

Our preaching over the past three years (since early 2018) has included intentional explorations of how we understand scriptural authority, and how we believe Scripture invites us to hold our theological beliefs and values. Examples of this would be [Life Together](#) (themes of unity and the 1-2-3s), [The Apostles' Creed](#), as well as [1 John](#). On a related note, our entire [Partnership](#) framework and process has been reframed largely around the need for shared unity as understood by Scripture—a [unity](#) which does not depend on agreement on all matters.

We formed a Listening Team consisting mainly of Artisan Partners who are not part of the Lead or Pastoral Teams. Together they have listened to individuals' stories and concerns, to external perspectives through study and dialogue, and to the Spirit through active prayer.

While we believe we have listened well, and have done our best, we freely admit and lament the fact that there are things we wish we could have done better. Numerous factors have contributed to the fact that this has been less than perfect, including the resignation of our Lead Pastor and the COVID pandemic happening within a short period. The latter in particular has affected the mental health of many within our community, and has severely limited our ability to gather, listen, and converse as we would have liked.

**We have EXAMINED our understanding of human identity, gender, and sexuality.**

Our “examining” in many ways flows from and is connected to our “listening” described above. How has this examining work been guided? How can we be assured that we’ve been led by God’s Spirit?

Megan DeFranza, speaking of the conversation on LGBTQ+ inclusion within the church, wisely said, “There is no recognized ecumenical council to deliberate on such matters for us. Instead, we must listen to the voice of the Spirit as we study the Scriptures and sift other sources of wisdom from the tradition(s) of the church, human experience, and our growing knowledge of the human body and sexuality gained from science, psychology, sociology, etc. The good news is this conversation is already under way—in this volume and elsewhere in the church—and a number of common themes are emerging.”

A thoughtful exploration of Scripture is not something we can separate from our attempts to listen to the voice of the Spirit. As part of the Anabaptist tradition, we have sought to live into a community hermeneutic approach to such discerning, which offers both protection from individual prejudice and heresy and an opportunity to hear Scripture in fresh ways.<sup>2</sup> And not only do Spirit and the scriptures need to be linked, they also need to be integrated with *other sources of wisdom* noted by DeFranza above.

To that end, we as the Lead and Pastoral Teams have read numerous books, articles, studies, and academic journals, and have listened to podcasts. ([Link to full list.](#))

Our Facilitation Team hosted three Media Nights that gave opportunity for our wider church community to read (or listen to) and discuss many of these same resources. These were intentionally chosen to expose our community to diverse perspectives. They included Tony and Peggy Campolo’s debate on same-sex marriage, Wesley Hill’s *Washed and Waiting*, Justin Lee’s *Torn*, *The Liturgists Podcast* (Ep 20 – LGBTQ), and Ken Wilson’s *A Letter to my Congregation*.

One of our pastors hosted a Table Group on a formative book called *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church* (edited by Preston Sprinkle). As the title indicates, this in-depth theological study was chosen deliberately to invite those who call Artisan home to engage with scholars who have explored various sides of the debate. Besides its *content*, its *tone* was another significant reason it was included. A unique offering among the volumes being written on this topic, this is a book that presents a constructive dialogue between people who disagree on significant ethical and theological matters, yet maintain a respectful and humanizing posture toward one another. In other words, *Two Views* modelled a key theological value we have wanted to hold throughout this process—namely, the ability to hear each other with respect and disagree well.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://garethbrandt.wordpress.com/2013/11/09/community-hermeneutic/>

## **We now want to CLARIFY our beliefs and practices around inclusion and participation at Artisan with respect to those who identify as LGBTQ+.**

In Romans 14-15, Paul addresses an issue that is dividing the Roman church. There are two groups of Christ followers, and each have their own set of convictions about eating habits, shaped by the culture that formed them. This may sound trivial, but rest assured, these were tightly-held convictions about right and wrong living: a moral issue with each side sure they had it right. Likely, the Christ-following Jews (who abstained from eating certain foods) were having trouble doing life with the Christ-following Gentiles (who did not). Life together was new terrain for both sides, and conflict over this “disputable matter” arose. Paul counselled these believers towards a posture of mutual embrace for the sake of the gospel.

While the disputable matter at hand for the Roman Christians was what foods were acceptable, the “disputable matter” for us is about what sexual ethics are appropriate for a Christ follower wanting to discern God's way.

Some people in our congregation will have a traditional view of marriage, sexuality and gender identity. Likewise, the Jewish Christians at Rome held a traditional view of what foods were acceptable, based on their conviction that certain Jewish scriptures and traditions still held weight for their actions even in their new reality as Christ followers.

On the other hand, some people in our congregation will hold an open and affirming view which defends the legitimacy of LGBTQ+ sexuality, gender identity, and marriage as a good and accepted way for a Christian. Likewise, the Gentile Christians at Rome did not believe that Christ was calling them to give up certain foods and adopt a Jewish practice of eating. It is worth pointing out that Paul saw these Gentile Christians' way of being (eating) as not just “acceptable” or “tolerable” but, in fact, a good and strong way for a Roman Christian to be.

Offering guidance to this community, Paul does not enforce a uniform “position” on the Roman Christians. Instead, he encourages both Jews and Gentiles to abandon judgment of each other's convictions and to embrace each other across the divide. This meant that all were welcomed and included at every level of church participation in Rome's Christian community—but that wasn't so much the debate as the ethical legitimacy of each others' ways of being.

“Accept one another, then,” Paul wrote, “just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” (Romans 15:7)

We have been deeply drawn toward and influenced by this example of mutual embrace in the scriptures. We believe it is where God is leading us as a church. We suspect God is leading us to a place that is neither “open and affirming (with no room for alternative positions)” nor “traditional” but a third way: an alternative place of radical acceptance and inclusion rarely seen

in this world. To be absolutely clear, this posture leads us to embrace and include all LGBTQ+ folx, including those who identify as SSA. It also asks us to embrace those who hold more traditional views, and consider same-sex marriage to go against Scripture. We acknowledge that individuals within the community will hold a diversity of perspectives within (and perhaps beyond) this range. But we, Artisan Church—as an embodiment of Christ, in order to glorify God—choose to accept and embrace one another within this tension.

We therefore acknowledge all LGBTQ+ and SSA people as equal partners in the gospel, extending a mutual attitude of respect and partnership in ministry. What does this mean? We will practice full inclusion within the church, at every level of leadership. No one will be excluded from any form of leadership (e.g. Pastoral Team, Lead Team, or any other aspect of church service at Artisan) due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, nor related convictions and relationships. No LGBTQ+ person will be excluded from leadership for dating someone of the same sex or gender, nor for committing to their partner in a covenantal marriage relationship, nor for living into one's gender identity. We will seek to discern and celebrate each LGBTQ+ and SSA person's call to leadership within our church in the same way we would a straight, cisgendered person's call.

In embracing LGBTQ+ persons as full members of the body of Christ, we will celebrate LGBTQ+ covenantal marriages. Of course, this same attitude of celebration and support will be extended to community members who identify as SSA and choose *not* to marry someone of the same sex. Further, we want to do better as a church in celebrating singleness for its own sake. We recognize there are those among us who choose not to marry, or sense a calling to celibacy. As a church, we want to do life together and seek to disciple people regardless of their marital status. But celibacy will not be demanded of anyone based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

The “divergent views within our leadership” mentioned earlier in this Statement relates in part to the question of our pastors performing marriages. But even though this diversity exists now, and may well continue for a good while, we are a multi-staff team and we embrace our diversity. From this point forward, we commit to always having someone on our staff who will perform marriages for any and all couples who are rooted in the life of our church according to the same discernment process afforded straight cisgendered couples. What this means is that any LGBTQ+ couple in a faithful, committed relationship who is seeking to get married—and who call Artisan home—will be given the opportunity, if so desired, to have their marriage officiated by an Artisan pastor.

We use the word “opportunity” intentionally here, since there are always reasons a pastor may choose *not* to marry someone (eg. polygamy, unaddressed addictions, infidelity), or reasons a pastor may be *unable* to officiate a wedding at a particular time (eg. due to sabbaticals, holidays, extended leave). What we *are* saying, though, is that sexual orientation and/or gender identity will not be among those reasons.

## **We commit to FOLLOW Jesus into deep unity in difference, a reaffirmation of our primary identity as God's beloved children, and transformation by God's Love.**

The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once said, "The challenge to the religious imagination is to see God's image in one who is not in our image."

The "third way" we want to follow Christ into is the way of peacemaking. We have come to believe that the heart of the conversation is not about how you interpret Romans 1 or 1 Timothy 1 or Leviticus 18, but rather what you do with people who read those texts differently than you. We are convinced that it's about doing what is unimaginable for so much of our culture: not ignoring or eradicating or even tolerating difference, but *living* with difference.

The third way means wide inclusion. It should be clear by now we would not disqualify someone from *any* level of church leadership (including a Pastoral role or Lead Team role) based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Nor would we disqualify someone from leadership who holds a traditional view. Both are celebrated and included in *full* participation in the life of the church. The church is called to be the space of peace, where antagonism is extracted and where reconciliation is evident.

At the same time, the third way is not *only* about mutual embrace and inclusion, but *mutual transformation*. We don't just practice acceptance and embrace as ends in themselves, but so that we may continue together on the lifelong journey of apprenticeship to Jesus. The church is to be defined by love, and radically open to the other. We believe the church is *less* without the presence of her LGBTQ+ siblings. Straight, cisgendered Christ-followers must learn and be open to transformation from their LGBTQ+ siblings, and vice-versa.

This may cause distress to folks of differing perspectives and practices, but we believe the gospel is asking us to err on the side of embrace, to lay down our tightly-held convictions out of love for each other, the Church, and Christ who is head of the Church. We believe this is a powerful and counter-cultural witness to a world that is divided. Our deep desire is to courageously live into the understanding that the Church is exactly the place where we are called to share life with people who are radically different from us.

Ken Wilson offers some helpful glimpses of what this looks like in practice. "A third way," he says, "challenges 'conservatives' and 'liberals' on this issue in different ways":

*The 'conservative' is challenged to accept those who don't share [their] moral objections... not to separate from those who are 'liberal' on this basis, but to embrace them instead.*

*The third way challenges 'liberals' to refrain from holding 'conservatives' in contempt or mild condescension, as the case may be.*

*The liberal [and conservative] in the third way approach is called to trade the pleasure of sharing faith in a like-minded group for the challenge of sharing faith in a diverse one. [Any] instinctive commitment to diversity will be tested under the third-way approach. (A Letter to my Congregation, p. 118–122)*

We are asked to embrace each other across these divides—divides that are far too calcified in our world, and only distract from being Christ's body in it. No matter where you find yourself ideologically, you, our community members, are all wanted here, and are being invited to extend that spirit of embrace to each other.

To be clear, we are a community that embraces each other across a *plurality* of convictions. However, we do not embrace *relativity*. There are some ways of being towards each other that are just plain unacceptable as Christians. Hate speech, derogatory language, inflicting shame, abuse, or any discriminatory action towards each other because of one's position and/or practice will not be tolerated and will be dealt with lovingly but firmly. This is the case no matter who is being discriminated against, but given the church's history of mistreating other-than-straight people, it is worth saying explicitly: if you identify as LGBTQ+ or SSA, we will endeavour to champion and uphold your safety.

## Conclusion

We know that this is a high call—one that will impact the LGBTQ+ community, including those who identify as SSA, the most. We do not offer this path forward lightly, or without recognition of the challenge ahead. And yet, we feel that Jesus is walking this path alongside us. His self-emptying example paves our way. And as Christ occupies the low-down, power-eschewing, humble space of the cross, He invites us to join Him.

One of the reasons we are drawn to a milestone statement over a decision statement is that the former feels dynamic—aware that with the inclusion of more voices and new information, we might, over time and with the Spirit's help, arrive at new insights—whereas a “decision” feels static. We know we have more to discover still about sexuality and gender identity, more voices to learn from, and even more dialogue with you, our church community. We will always be learning. And yet, after four years, we need to meaningfully mark our journey to this point. An awareness of what's yet-to-arrive needs to be held alongside this milestone—a point at which we *have* arrived, a point that clarifies our path forward, but one point along the journey of Artisan, of the church, of being a people who continue to deepen in our practice of imaging God. And so, we offer this Statement with deep gratitude for all of you who have undertaken this journey, and who will continue to walk it with us. We need you. We love you. We cherish your participation. And we are grateful that we are all walking this road together, looking collectively to the Triune One who embraces us all, the One whose acceptance we all have, the One whose radical love of us is immeasurably more than we could ever understand.