

University Christian Church

Special Called Board of Stewards Meeting

July 14, 2015

UNAPPROVED

Stewards Present:

Mark Alland	Greg Farr
Phyllis Allen	Heather Harris
Mary Nell Andrus	Martha Lunday
Lee Brookshire	Monty Phillips
William Butler	Cathy Taylor
Carolyn Critz	Carol Wilkerson
Walter Echols	Margaret Puckett

Ex-Officio Member Present:

Rev. Larry Thomas, Senior Minister
Rev. Ellen Lewis, Associate Minister

A special called meeting of the Board of Stewards of University Christian Church was called to order at 6:35 p.m. with an opening prayer by Sandi Kennedy. In addition to the Board members, there were approximately 70 members in attendance.

The Chair, Monty Phillips, explained that although no board meeting was planned for this month, he felt it was important to call this special meeting because of the recent Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v Hodges*. The Board met in June in executive session to discuss what action, if any, needed to be taken by the Board. Disciples churches are congregationally led with bylaws that direct our actions.

Several individuals signed up to speak. An emphasis was placed on the need to maintain decorum and ensure that no opinion is unworthy or unwelcome.

Monty Phillips then gave a short review of pertinent provisions of the UCC Bylaws, specifically Paragraph 7.6(a), which states that it is the specific responsibility and duty of the Board to establish, interpret and enforce policies, which is the purpose of the single item agenda for this meeting.

A two page summary document authored by Jeanne Duke and Monty Phillips was distributed and is attached. The board traditionally does not make policies for weddings as they are not mentioned in the bylaws at all. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the Supreme Court decision and its consequences at UCC.

Members speaking were overwhelmingly supportive of the ministers' right to make their own decisions regarding marriage of same sex couples. Initial speakers were Eldon Irving, former Chair of the Elders, Judy Stempel, Lee Brookshire, and Judy O'Donnell. Others speaking were Mark Alland and Avis Herndon. Avis stated that we should embrace inclusivity and unconditional love.

Ministers present were Larry Thomas, Ellen Lewis, Cyndy Twedell, Russ Boyd and Jessica Vacketta.

Senior Minister – People have responded differently to the June 28 sermon. Affirmation has been overwhelmingly positive. He has had some conversations but cannot respond to others because the correspondence was not signed. There may be some here who have different opinions. However, it will not affect how you are ministered to. Why did I do this? Because this is a huge issue in our country. To have been silent was to invite an unhealthy conversation that would last for years. Then, down the road if a same sex marriage is performed, it could spur a problem. The world is very different today. The current policy is that it is up to the staff to perform marriages. Rev. Thomas said he hopes it will remain this way. If you changed the policy, members would have to get together to make each decision, thus taking it out of the hands of the ministers. He hopes that you will trust in the ministers' education, values and how they work with people to make the correct decision. We are still willing to love one another and include all. He looks forward to sustainability for the future.

The issue of Biblical interpretation has come up a number of times. Some individuals believe Rev. Thomas has been cavalier. However, he has tried to interpret the scripture. The scriptures do not view marriage as we know it today and do not talk about our relationships. Most marriages at the time of those writings were arranged for the protection of property rights and preservation of blood lines. Overarching themes spoken about is the command to love our neighbor.

In the interest of transparency, he will entertain questions about staff discussions. Pam Reeser will get calls with the request for a marriage ceremony. After that, she will check available dates and then check with staff to see who is available. Ministers require a minimum of three meetings with each couple. Rev. Thomas uses a psychological profile to determine compatibility. We have not had any calls from same gender couples yet but he expects that we will at some point.

The question was asked: how can we embrace those who do not feel the same and keep them here? Rev. Thomas said that has had a couple of meetings with individuals. For some the only compromise is that we NOT do the weddings. He hopes that those in opposition will be angry at him and not at each other so we can get past this. He will try to preach about context, listen to other disciplines but will not have the answer to all conundrums. In the 21st century, viable congregations must focus on this.

The question was asked: what is the process for non-members who call to schedule weddings? Rev. Thomas responded that we will have the same process for them. However, fees are different for non-members.

Walt Hatter stated that his fear is that we will lose members. Our challenge is to continue to love each other.

At this time, Monty Phillips noted that no one else has asked to speak. The Bylaws do not state that there should be a vote; the Board is only to set and interpret policy. The Bylaws have no wording regarding weddings and marriage. The board's intention is to leave the decision to the staff.

Rev. Thomas stated that we are not inviting press coverage and will not do any interviews. We are going to be guided by our conscience.

Ernie O'Donnell eloquently closed the meeting with a beautiful statement in lieu of a prayer.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 7:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Sean Strange (Not in attendance)
Board Secretary

Thelia Chaffin
Assistant to Senior Minister

Summary, University Christian Church Board meetings and US Supreme Court Decision, June 2015

Authors: Jeanne Duke, BOS Vice-Chair and Monty Phillips, BOS Chair

The 2015-2016 Board of Stewards (BOS) met in executive session on June 16, 2015, to discuss the issue of same sex marriage in anticipation of the Supreme Court's decision in *Obergefell v Hodges*. All current voting BOS members except three were present. The discussion centered upon UCC's wedding policies if the Supreme Court decision included an order requiring states to issue legal marriage licenses to same sex couples. This is, in fact, how the Supreme Court ruled, on June 26.

The board found no reason to change our current wedding policies and procedures regarding our members, with the understanding that the result would be that UCC would likely host same sex weddings and that at least some of our ministry staff would likely preside at same sex weddings.

This being the first time the board has brought up this issue, the BOS did not vote on the issue of same sex marriage. For UCC, a member is any person who expresses a desire to join, has confessed faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and has been baptized. UCC's bylaws add that each member has a responsibility to share in the life and ministries of the congregation. A vote regarding same sex marriage presumes that the BOS, Assembly, or congregation has the power to constrain members from full participation in the life of the congregation by having a legally permitted wedding within our facility. Similarly, a vote regarding same sex marriage presumes that the BOS, Assembly, or congregation has the power to constrain its ministry staff from presiding at a legally permitted wedding. We find no such powers in our bylaws.

A determination not to permit same sex weddings in our facility would prevent our own members from holding their own weddings in their own church building. Similarly, a decision to prevent our ministers from presiding at same sex weddings would deprive members from having UCC ministers preside at their weddings. In effect, the decision would create a new class of congregational membership not found in the bylaws: members with the ability to fulfill all the responsibilities of membership except to have a legal wedding in the building or having ministry staff preside at their legal wedding.

Moreover, a vote regarding same sex marriage presumes that there is an underlying theological concern vital to our ministry at stake. Disciples of Christ, however, value and encourage individuals to develop their own religious understandings. In addition, UCC has no recent history of voting on social issues that derive from sincerely held religious convictions but have the power to cause political strife such as abortion, the death penalty, or LGBT rights. **The board, in its executive session meeting June 16, declined the opportunity to begin the practice.**

UCC's current wedding policies and procedures are silent on the issue of same sex weddings and, therefore, allow UCC to consider any request for a legal wedding. We presume that the couple will present a legally issued marriage license at the appropriate time. In the context of the Supreme Court ordering states to issue marriage licenses to same sex couples, members who are same sex couples requesting a UCC wedding would be in the same position as any other couple seeking to use UCC property as a venue. We would presume that they will present their license at the appropriate time.

Additionally, it is the policy of UCC clergy, with members and non-members alike, to visit with the engaged couple, interview them, get to know them, and settle into a relationship with them to the degree that the officiating clergy member feels comfortable solemnizing and officiating at the wedding of that couple. This policy, in place for many, many years, makes the relationship between clergy and couple thoughtful, intentional, and solemn to the purpose of lasting marriage before God. UCC does not allow outside clergy to perform marriages in our sanctuary. Thus, UCC clergy are individually bound to the couple and may (indeed, many have) decide after meeting with the couple that he or she does not wish to perform the wedding.

It is always timely for UCC's members to revisit whenever and where-ever possible our Belief Statement which includes among others:

"The Oneness of the Church: All Christians are called to be one in Christ and to seek opportunities for common witness and service." and

"Freedom of Belief: As Disciples, we are called together around two essentials of faith: a belief in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and that Christians are free to follow their conscience guided by Bible study, the Holy Spirit and prayer. We are expected to extend that freedom to others."

And our Mission Statement that includes:

"We are called to create a loving and caring community for all people, and work together for justice and peace in our world. Recognizing that our spiritual journeys are all different, we strive to be respectful and inclusive concerning each individual's relationship with God."

The board understands that some members of the congregation would prefer a different outcome, either the banning of same sex weddings on the premises or the prohibition of UCC ministry staff from presiding at same sex weddings. As a remedy, we refer these individuals to section 3.8.a of the bylaws, which states that the BOS must schedule a meeting of the Assembly within 30 days of its receipt of a petition to address an issue that is signed by 12 members of the Assembly.