

Leadership Council Conclusions on Discernment Process

Presented to the RBC Annual Meeting by Leadership Council

January 28, 2018

Summary of the process:

In Fall 2016 the RBC Adult Selectives Class held an eight-week series of “Conversations on Sexual Identity, Gender Orientation and the Response of God’s People.” At the end, the class urged that ways be found to include the entire congregation in the conversation. Pastor Karen took the class’ request to the Leadership Council, who agreed to call together a discernment team from within the congregation to help shape a process for this. Six people agreed to serve as a Discernment Team: Bob Brownback, Karen Hite, Sandy Rosenberry, Reid Trulson, Abigail Turley and Megan Webb. Pastor Karen did not serve on the Team but was available as a resource person. RBC identifies itself as “a diverse, Christ-centered community where grace is abundant, growth is encouraged, and our love of God leads us to serve wherever we are called.” Accordingly, the Team members reflected RBC’s identity by having diverse thoughts and understandings related to LGBTQ issues. It formulated the following goal: **“The goal of the RBC Discernment Team is to help RBC discern the mind and will of God for our congregation’s ministry to and with LGBTQ persons.”**

The Team began meeting in April 2017 to plan a spiritual discernment process for the church. The Team’s first three months focused on reading books and resources that examined various translations and interpretations of the several Old and New Testament texts that are most often cited in discussions of homosexuality. After discussing their readings and their scripture study, the Team reported to the church through a written statement entitled *An Invitation to a Conversation*. On Sunday July 16, 2017 Sandi Rosenberry and Reid Trulson read the statement to the church. The *Invitation* defined discernment as “perception in the absence of judgment, with a view of obtaining spiritual direction and spiritual understanding.” It invited the entire congregation into a process of spiritual discernment to understand what is true and best for us, following the Holy Spirit as we perceive the Spirit leading us. The statement was also made available in hardcopy, on RBC’s website and the bulletin board.

The Team was committed to work with transparency as it continued its reading and research. It began each of its meetings with scripture study and prayer, discussing the following passages: Luke 13:11-21; Luke 10:1-12; Genesis 12:1-9; Acts 15:1-21; Micah 6:6-8; Acts 5:17-42; Acts 10:9-36; Romans 12:1-18 and Romans 14:1-23. It made summaries of its meetings and other resources available to the church through the bulletin board. Throughout the process it reported its work to the Leadership Council and invited the congregation to ask questions and share comments and insights with Team members.

Starting in August it invited the congregation to participate in a “One Church – One Book” process of reading and discussing the book *Changing Our Mind* by David P. Gushee. It purchased multiple copies so people could borrow the book.

In September, the film *For the Bible Tells Me So* was shown with follow-up discussion. In October, Eastern University professor Dr. Yolanda Turner spoke on the science of gender and sexual identity. In September through early November, the Adult Selectives Class led chapter-by-chapter discussions of *Changing Our Mind*. Small groups and the RBC Book

Club were also invited to read and discuss the book. In November, the Team requested permission to meet with the Leadership Council to present a year-to-date summary report of the discernment process. On December 12, 2017 the Team met with Leadership Council, summarized the process that had taken place over the previous sixteen months and presented a summary of findings.

The Team's ten findings were the following:

Summary of the findings:

1. Seventy-six percent of the congregation has visibly participated to date in various elements of the discernment process. The words "visibly participated" mean attending the 2017 and 2018 Adult Selectives classes, or attending the film, or attending the lecture, or borrowing the book, or sharing questions, comments or insights with members of the Team.
2. A majority of participants to this point have expressed desire for RBC to minister to and with LGBTQ persons by using terms such as "welcoming and affirming," "inclusivity," "accept people as they are," "generous orthodoxy" and "safe, non-judgmental space."
3. Some persons have been reticent to voice their opinion.
4. There are a larger number of people within RBC that identify as LGBTQ than the Discernment Team had previously been aware.
5. There are more people within RBC that have close family members that identify as LGBTQ than the Discernment Team had previously been aware.
6. If the church is to serve the entire RBC congregation, it will be ministering to and with LGBTQ people.
7. If the church wants to serve people in the surrounding community and world, it will be ministering to and with LGBTQ people.
8. One LGBTQ member of RBC attended a Discernment Team meeting and provided very helpful thoughts and perspective.
9. For most persons here and in the area who are in their 30s and younger, LGBTQ is not an issue. For most of them, the church's attitude regarding LGBTQ is the issue. Items that are seen as problematic include:
 - Are LGBTQ persons welcome at RBC?
 - If welcomed, could they be fully a part of the church?
 - Would they be judged for showing affection to a partner?
 - Would it be possible to be married at RBC?
 - Could a couple have a child dedication here?
 - Would this be a safe place to bring or invite LGBTQ friends to attend?
10. The Team's research found that it is generally divisive to have a church vote on this aspect of ministry and is healthier for the leadership group within the church to come to a conclusion on behalf of the congregation.

The Discernment Team's summary concluded with three recommendations:

1. That the Leadership Council send a letter inviting the congregation to share their insights regarding God's will for our congregation's ministry to and with LGBTQ persons.
2. That the Leadership Council act on behalf of the congregation to draw the conclusions regarding RBC's ministry to and with LGBTQ persons.
3. That whatever conclusions the Leadership Council draws, there should be follow-up actions to those conclusions.

Leadership Council Actions

On behalf of the Leadership Council, our church Moderator Bob Brownback sent a letter to the congregation that was distributed on Sunday, December 17, 2017 and mailed to those that were not present that day. The letter invited the congregation to express in writing their discernment of God's will concerning our church's ministry to and with LGBTQ persons. Forty-three individuals replied with written responses. Forty-four more individuals had verbally shared their discernment with Team members. Twenty individuals expressed no opinion to either the Discernment Team or Leadership Council. Of these individuals, 67% expressed their belief that God is leading RBC to be a welcoming and inclusive congregation; 9% did not sense God leading in that direction; 5% indicated that they are uncertain and still thinking through the issue; and 19% expressed no opinion.

The Leadership Council devoted several hours of its Tuesday, January 9, 2018 meeting to the written and verbal discernment expressed by the church. As part of spiritual discernment, the Council discussed not only the numerical data cited above but also the content being voiced by the congregation as well as insights from their own scripture study, conversations, research, thought and prayer.

The meeting concluded as the Council received, discussed and approved 10 to 1 the following statement: **"The Leadership Council has concluded that God has been speaking through the congregation for RBC to welcome and minister to and with all persons without distinction based on sexual orientation or gender identity."**

The Council agrees that there now needs to be follow-up thought and action based on this conclusion. That thought and action will help us live out our identity as "a diverse, Christ-centered community where grace is abundant, growth is encouraged, and our love of God leads us to serve wherever we are called." Those who feel called to be part of a "Diversity Working Group" are invited to speak to Pastor Karen, Bob Brownback or Reid Trulson.