

September 14, 2015

Rev. Jim Lyon, Director
Church of God Ministries
PO Box 2420
Anderson, IN 46018

Dear Rev. Lyon:

In my letter to you on June 2, 2015, I expressed my concern about the resolutions on homosexuality passed by the General Assembly of the Church of God and suggested that a committee be appointed for making an in-depth study about the issues concerning the Church in regard to the gay rights movement. I appreciated the discussion we had during our luncheon together in July, and as we parted, it was my understanding that you would be giving further consideration to the possibility of appointing such a committee.

During the early 1990s, Ken Prunty, Paul Smith, and I sponsored several Forums designed to help us all come to a deeper understanding of homosexuality. Our third Forum was during the 1993 International Convention of the Church of God, and of 140 persons invited, about 60 were in attendance. One of our accomplishments was the approval of a resolution calling for a three-year in-depth study of homosexuality (copy attached). The resolution, presented to the General Assembly by Rev. Bill Soetenga and a member of the Board of Trustees of Anderson University, was defeated, and the proposed 1993 resolution that many of us strongly objected to was passed. I am confident that Bill Soetenga, Ken Prunty, Paul Smith, and many other persons in the Church of God would be as hopeful as I am that an in-depth study committee (or task force) will be appointed in the near future.

At our luncheon in July, I told you about a paper I was writing regarding my views about homosexuality and promised to send you a copy. It has taken much longer to finish than I had anticipated, but I am finally sending a copy. The paper is entitled: *Gay and Lesbian Couples Need Our Approval, Our Love, Our Support*. It is my response to the Supreme Court Decision on Same-Sex Marriage. If a study committee is appointed, I think what I have to say in the paper would be of interest to them. It may also be of interest to those persons planning the 2016 Regional Forums on Sexual Ethics that you mentioned.

In my paper I refer to four different stances we may take, particularly within the church, in regard to homosexuality. As presented by a theologian, James B. Nelson, in 1980, the stances are *rejecting-punitive*, *rejecting-nonpunitive*, *qualified acceptance*, and *full-acceptance*. The terms are pretty much self-explanatory except, perhaps, the *qualified acceptance* stance which maintains that homosexuality is a sin, but acknowledges that a homosexual orientation is not a choice one makes and that it is unsusceptible to change. Thus, gays and lesbians who want to marry a person of their own gender are encouraged to maintain committed relationships.


The resolutions passed by the General Assembly of the Church of God in 1979, 1993, 2004, and 2014 clearly place us in the *rejecting-nonpunitive* stance in regard to persons with a homosexual orientation. If we think of the four stances in reference to Christians who are advocates of same-sex marriage, however, the stance of the Church of God is *rejecting-punitive* in that pastors who perform marriage ceremonies for gay and lesbian couples may lose their ordination and other

employees in our churches and church agencies can be dismissed. Both of these stances, as well as the third stance, though not consciously intended to do so, actually lend support to the continuing negative beliefs, prejudicial attitudes, and the discrimination directed toward persons with a homosexual orientation.

The above resolutions are based, at least in part, upon attitudes and beliefs we now know are unwarranted, and in all sincerity, I believe them to be demeaning to persons with a homosexual orientation and their families. Let's assume that Josh, a 24 year-old Christian, and Steve, a 23 year-old Christian, have been close friends and have been attending, along with their families, a Church of God congregation all of their lives. They and their families have been actively involved in church activities and are held in high regard by others in the church. Both Josh and Steve began to realize at an early age that they were homosexual. They never confided in each other about this until their senior year in college when they began to realize that they were very much in love with each other. Each had, in his early teens, told his parents about his homosexual orientation. The parents of each were very accepting and continued loving their sons the same as ever. Now, at 24 and 23, Josh and Steve want to be married in the church they have always attended, the same church where Josh's older sister was married a couple of years earlier. They also want their pastor to perform the wedding ceremony. How deeply hurt Josh, Steve, and their families must feel, knowing that their pastor will not perform their wedding ceremony and that they cannot be married in the church they have always attended. And how deeply painful it must be for Josh and Steve, who have been loyal, devoted Christians most of their lives to know that if they marry the one person they love more than any other, they will no longer be accepted as Christian.

I honestly believe, Rev. Lyon, that if our Church of God pastors will give serious in-depth study to the knowledge we now have about homosexuality and to the knowledge we now have about what the Bible says and doesn't say about homosexuality they will soon be in favor of the Church of God moving to the *full-acceptance* stance as several other churches have already done. Once this is accomplished, much needed attention can then be devoted to helping all married couples—both same-sex couples and heterosexual couples—build as strong, successful, stable marriages as possible.

Sincerely,



Vern Norris,
Professor Emeritus of Sociology

Enclosures: 1. Gay and Lesbian Couples Need Our Approval, Our Love, Our Support
2. Resolution Calling for an In-depth Study of Homosexuality

Copies to: Dr. David Markle, Dr. John Pistole, Dr. James Lewis, Rev. Bill and Janet Soetenga, and a few other friends