

Hello Emmanuel,

As we come to the end of our Community Conversation and head into our Town Hall meeting next Thursday, April 7, I want to offer a few personal thoughts. I thought I would communicate them in this format to free up time at the meeting for comments and questions from others.

This has been a heavy conversation for all of us, and coming as it did during the pandemic only compounded its heaviness. Challenging though it has been, I wish to commend all of you for engaging in this conversation with humility and respect. I thank God for your graciousness and generosity. I trust that we have all grown in our understanding of the issues as well as in our attentiveness to the Holy Spirit, who is our teacher and guide. And I pray that we will continue to engage these conversations, at Thursday's Town Hall and beyond, in a similar spirit of openness, prayerfulness and grace.

I also wish to acknowledge the work of the Community Conversation Committee in helping to guide the process and arranging the various presentations. Thank you for a job well done.

Most of you are aware of my position on the Identity Statement, a document that I embrace fully and endorse wholeheartedly. Most of you are also aware of my commitment to the Church's historic position on marriage and sexuality. As I noted last November, the statement on marriage in the Identity Statement represents the position of our church association since its inception, a position which was reiterated through Assembly motions in 2003, 2013, and 2017. It is a position that our association shares with the universal and global church of Jesus Christ, based on a common understanding of God's word. From my perspective, the Identity Statement contains nothing that is new to our association; it is simply an attempt to bring together into one document the core beliefs and practices that we have already agreed on. Indeed, its content, in an earlier iteration, has formed the basis of one section of our own Membership Class for the past 16 years.

Nevertheless, and as has become obvious through our ongoing conversations, I am aware that some among us see things differently. Our church-wide survey from last summer indicated that we, as a church family, are quite divided on the Identity Statement, and on the issue of same-sex marriage in particular. Our differences have continued to surface in the various conversations since then. It is obvious that the Identity Statement has been a source of distress and frustration for some. Some have expressed frustration with the CBWC for bringing it forward at all; others are frustrated with it being introduced during the pandemic. Some see it as the denomination usurping local church autonomy; others are concerned that it is designed to exclude 2SLBGTO+ people. Some have expressed concerns about us fracturing as a church. These are all valid concerns, which I hope the conversation has addressed to some degree of satisfaction.

But the differences remain, and they are very real. And I confess that I see no simple or easy way for us to resolve them. I have prayed continually for God's grace and guidance for us as a church family, that we may be led to the best possible outcomes. I will continue to do so. But at

the same time, I wonder whether we will be able to continue as we are. Please continue to pray for the upcoming Townhall meeting, for the votes in May here at Emmanuel and at Assembly, and for the decisions that will follow, both for our church and for our church association.

For those of you who identify as 2SLGBTQ+ persons, I wish to acknowledge that the Christian community has not always expressed the love and grace of Jesus Christ in its words and actions toward you. We have not always shown the compassion and kindness of Jesus. At times, we have been ungracious and unkind, even mean. To whatever extent I have participated in such behaviour, I wish to say that I am sorry. I deeply regret any hurt that I have caused, and ask for your forgiveness. While it has never been my intention to hurt anyone, I am well aware that from time to time I have done so. I am all too aware of my own shortcomings and need for God's mercy, and daily seek God's help to communicate his truth and grace in a spirit of love and understanding.

As a pastor, it is my desire to walk in love and compassion with every person I meet, coming alongside them as a fellow traveller, facing our sin and brokenness together, pointing them to Jesus. I want for our church to welcome and love every person who attends, inviting them to participate in our church family regardless of their sexual orientation or identity. It is my hope that people from the 2SLGBTQ+ community will feel welcomed at Emmanuel and discover the love and grace of Jesus our Lord, growing in their allegiance to Jesus and his kingdom. But I am also well aware that at times my theological convictions have unintentionally caused pain and feelings of rejections to those in our community. And while I regret that, I wonder whether it can ultimately be avoided, given the clash of convictions that we are dealing with. I confess that I feel torn at times between my convictions and my awareness of the frustration and pain that those convictions have contributed to that community, intentionally or not. I have no desire to contribute further pain and, yet, I cannot avoid the demands of God's word as I understand it.

It is my pastoral responsibility to call us all, regardless of our gender, sexual orientation or marital status, to a life of ongoing discipleship to Jesus, and to invite us to bring every aspect of our lives, including our sexualities, under his Lordship. I wish to do all I can to encourage and support us in that journey. I am convinced that Christian love is concerned with the highest welfare of the loved one, and that our highest welfare can only be found in obedience to God's word and purposes. As your pastor, I am committed to living under the Lordship of Jesus and the authority of God's word. And I am constrained, first to study God's word, listening to others, then to communicate and teach the truths of God's word with humility and grace, to the best of my ability, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

I have not yet arrived. I acknowledge that learning is a lifelong pursuit and that my understanding will continue to grow and change, as it already has in several areas, such as women in ministry. But my personal journey has also deepened my conviction on many issues, including God's intentions for marriage and sexuality. To whatever extent I have become convinced that Scripture speaks clearly, to that extent I must also speak clearly, teaching with conviction and confidence, while at the same time continuing to listen to others and looking to

the Spirit for guidance and correction. At times, my understanding of Scripture places me at odds with our culture, and I fully appreciate that this may eventually carry a greater cost than it currently does. But I am responsible to communicate the truths of God's word to the best of my ability, convinced that these truths are the only sound basis for human flourishing.

I also have some awareness of the history of churches and denominations that have changed their understanding of marriage and sexuality, coming to a more inclusive and affirming position. From my vantage point, the outcomes of those shifts in the past have not been encouraging. The changing convictions on sexuality are often associated with a broader theological shift, sometimes going as far as to depart from other historic doctrines such as the deity of Christ, his atonement for sins, and the authority of Scripture. Such churches and denominations have experienced significant decline in their numbers and there's no indication of any reversal of that trend. I wonder whether the churches that are now advocating for a more progressive position on same-sex marriage will be able to avoid a similar outcome. I do not question their sincerity or good intentions. But I do question where this conversation is leading. What are its roots, and what will be the long-term fruit? Maybe the next generation may be able to avoid past outcomes, but I have my reservations.

Regardless of what is happening with other churches, however, what matters ultimately to me is faithfulness to our Triune God and to the word by which he has revealed his love and purposes for us. It is my intention to live and teach his word as faithfully and graciously as I can, for the glory of God and for the good of his people.

I offer these thoughts as your pastor, out of deep love and concern for our church. I pray that the Lord will continue to guide our ongoing deliberations and guard us from decisions that are contrary to his will. May our greatest concern be to honour him in all we do. In closing, brothers and sisters, with the apostle Paul, "I commend us to God's grace and to his word of truth which is able to build us up and give us an inheritance with all those he has set apart for himself" (Acts 20:32). May God have mercy on us and grant us much grace. Amen.