

CONFESSION OF IDENTITY



We are a community in the heart of the city called by Jesus to practice bold love of God and neighbor and boundless compassion for all people.

WHAT WE'RE DOING AND WHY

We, the beloved community of First Baptist Church on Fifth in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, partnering with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, hold deepest gratitude for the ways God has guided us throughout our church's life. After years of congregational transformation, upon this moment of new beginning following the covid-19 pandemic, and on this, the occasion of our church's 150th anniversary, we reaffirm and clarify our commitments to God, to each other, to downtown Winston-Salem, and to the world in this, our Confession of Identity.

We lament that the witness of the church in our own time is divided and confusing, often betraying the very heart of God, the life-giving way of Jesus, and the liberating movement of the Spirit. Christ's love compels us to confess the Christian church's complicity in exclusion and division, and at times we have been negligent, indifferent, and silent in the face of injustice. We confess our sinfulness, and, with God's grace, we seek to express within our lives the true faith to which we have been called.

We believe that the truest story we've ever known is the story of God who so loved the world.[1] The overflow of God's love for us and our love for God takes a particular form in our local congregation. Our church's vision statement, adopted in 2018, speaks of the shape of our obedience: to be "a community in the heart of the city called by Jesus to practice bold love of God and neighbor and boundless compassion for all people."

WE ARE A COMMUNITY

For 150 years as the first Baptist church in our town, we have continued to change. We are imperfect, yet hopeful travelers who choose to journey together with God throughout the seasons of life. Although much about our church's identity has changed over the years -- our space, our makeup, our size, our location -- we believe that God's dream for our church has stayed at the heart of our calling by Jesus, our connections to each other, and our commitments to the world.

Today, we're smaller in size, varied in demographic, and abundant in hope. Within First on Fifth, you'll see retirees and families with rambunctious little ones, teenagers discovering their identities and middle-agers juggling all the demands of this season, young

Winston-Salem has become the place that shapes our priorities, our resources, our relationships, our imagination. Here, we are from, and from here, we are sent. It is our neighborhood, the primary place we share together the call to live neighborly.

CALLED BY JESUS

This calling by Jesus threads through the everyday moments of our lives: from where we go, to who we love, to how we vote, to what we buy, and all manner of things in between. We understand calling to be a summoning to a particular way of life. And because that calling comes from Jesus, we are beckoned to a Jesus-shaped way of living: one of loving God and loving neighbor as we love ourselves, all the while pursuing the present and future kingdom of God.

Callings are personal and communal, intentional and intimate, Spirit-led and scripture-encouraged. Some write or counsel, some build or fix, some encourage or proclaim, some advocate or care. All who sense God's claim on their lives are called to sacrifice and to serve, to be "transformed by the renewal of our minds."^[2] We give thanks for the opportunity to recognize God-given gifts in each other while seeing the God-stirred convictions emerge among us.

In this season of our church's life, those shared callings have opened our minds, hearts, and lips in cultivating the well-being of children, mitigating poverty in our community, becoming a teaching and learning church, and growing in number and faithfulness. These callings have prompted our deepening work for racial justice, our embrace of LGBTQ individuals and families, and our commitment to equity and inclusion for all people. Each of these commitments reveals much that we've learned and even more that we don't yet know, yet each is connected to the heart of Christ.

TO PRACTICE

We believe that our efforts to follow Jesus are never perfected, only practiced. The truth is that no matter who we are, all of us are struggling and starting over, figuring things out and finding our way again. Thank God for the grace that comes with each new day!

We practice because we're learning to be more honest than we are and more loving than we have been. We practice not out of a sense of burden or duty, but out of joyful responsibility to God and each other. We practice because it's in daily living -- of actually doing the things that shape and form us in Love over and over again -- that these seeds take root.

We practice our faith together in the ways that followers of Jesus have done for centuries: gathering regularly in worship, Bible study, fellowship, and mission, praying and caring for and with each other, serving God when we're together and when we're apart, giving generously of ourselves and our resources, breaking bread together, and sharing God's story of Love with those we meet.

These practices help us remember who and whose we are. They orient us with intention away from our tendencies of scarcity and towards God's gifts of abundance. They surround us with other practitioners on the road, so we know we are never alone. They sustain us through all seasons of life: at birth and death, through relationships and vocations, in times of joy and suffering, and in the ordinary grounding of our living. They cultivate within us the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.[3] And in their own way, they plant hopeful seeds of the kingdom of God.

BOLD LOVE OF GOD AND NEIGHBOR

Our love for God and neighbor calls us to welcome, affirm, and celebrate all people in the fullness of who they are: beloved for their differing ages and races, sexual orientations and gender identities, means and sufferings, physical and mental abilities, levels of education and backgrounds, cultures and nationalities, doubts and beliefs. Why? Because God's love knows no boundaries, therefore our love shouldn't either. It is the 'bold love' of which we speak. So we say with fierce gladness: all are created in God's image, and all are unconditionally beloved. We know this to be profoundly true, because we have experienced it in our lives and within our church.

We see that God's call to serve and lead within the life of the church extends far and wide, and we give thanks for the variety of voices giving shape to our congregation's life together. We believe that any person who professes faith in God through Jesus can share in the gifts of full membership of First Baptist on Fifth, including baptism, communion, marriage, covenant with children and their families, ordination of deacons, ordination to the gospel ministry, celebrations of life, teaching, worship leadership, and pastoral care.

BOUNDLESS COMPASSION FOR ALL PEOPLE

We seek to practice boundless compassion for all people by lifting the lowly, caring for the poor, pursuing and amplifying the voices on the margins of life, calling out injustice wherever we see it, extending our care for all of God's creation, and working for the freedom of the oppressed. Our boundless compassion flows outwardly to our neighbor and inwardly to ourselves, for each of us is in need of God's liberation from all that holds us captive. As scripture teaches us, "we are members of one another."^[4] In our belonging, we bear each other's burdens and hardships, so that in mutual love and shared suffering, we all may be set free.

On our block or around our world, the compassion we hold is one of our deepest commitments as a church, and becomes an outgrowth of that bold love of God and neighbor. But mostly, it reminds us that caring for our neighbors and ourselves is never the final move. Mercy insists upon justice; compassion compels us to action.

Practicing this kind of boundless compassion is akin to how we understand the “now and not yet” kingdom of God: we try and we fail, we do so now and we know we aren’t yet where we need to be. And yet the courageous compassion of Jesus is our model, one ever more countercultural in this fractured, polarized age, and one we seek to practice each day.

CONCLUSION

With God’s help, we confess and commit ourselves to God, to one another, and to the work of cultivating a beloved community ‘for the living of these days.’

Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever!

THE CONGREGATION OF FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH ON FIFTH
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FIRST BAPTIST
ON FIFTH

[1] John 3:16 | [2] Romans 12:2 | [3] Galatians 5:22-23 | [4] Ephesians 4:25



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