



November 2021

Let me tell you a story of a people, a calling by God, and a Confession of Identity. Intimately connected to this season and bearing the voices of so many in our church family, this Confession represents fourteen months of congregational conversation about our identity and six weeks of focused congregational conversation around the need for, and language of, a Confession of Identity. This Confession is the epitome of *leitourgia*, or liturgy, that wonderful Greek word throughout the New Testament that speaks of the “work of the people.” **This letter is to tell the story behind the words**, attempting to capture the holy ground upon which we’ve walked and the breath of the Spirit which so clearly animated the work of these months.

The work of these 14 months has connected us with other congregational seasons of discernment in our history. It recalls for us the times when the church listened to the movement of the Spirit and discerned a path forward, like on the ordination of women to the diaconate and to the gospel ministry, the ability to marry interracial couples or individuals who had been divorced, the opening of our policy on baptism and the widening of God’s table of love, and the clarifying of our denominational home within the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. It roots us in our long-held DNA to reach beyond our spaces of comfort toward the margins, from the racial integration of our Children’s Center from its inception in 1967, to our housing of neighbors who are homeless in the 2000s, to our partnerships in launching all sorts of non-profit organizations in the community, most acutely with the Winston-Salem Center for Education and the Arts in 2012. It connects us to the work we’ve most recently completed over the past several years on our facilities and mission. This work of clarifying identity within the church is not the first, nor will it be the last.

If the work we did on our facilities helped us to answer the question of **where we are**, and if the work of our mission and vision shaped our answer to the question of **how we are**, the work we have completed on our Confession of Identity leads us to answer the question of **who we are**.

This question had been marinating in our congregation’s DNA for years, for as a ‘big tent church,’ our language around church identity has often been intentionally broad to hold together the vast theological and political perspectives represented within. And yet, as the landscape around us has sharpened and polarized, the questions that give shape to our identity were being asked around and about our church.

What kind of church is First Baptist on Fifth?, folks have wondered. In a time where so much can divide communities, what holds us together? How are we similar to and different from churches around us? Where can we give space to speak of the Spirit’s movement among us, even when that means talking about matters that inflame the heart and topics upon which we might disagree? And after we’ve

completed the building work which had dominated so much of our life together over the past few years, who are we on the other side?

These questions grew, gently but persistently, such that the Pastoral Discernment Group felt it was time to center a series of churchwide conversation around identity. Appointed by the Deacons in 2018 to, as their job description says, “gather regularly with the Pastor for careful listening, honest speaking, and prayerful discernment about the communal life of our church,” the Pastoral Discernment Group is made up of leaders serving by virtue of their role and leaders serving as members-at-large. Even as the pandemic pressed us away from our church house, the Discernment Group felt that this work of clarity was too important to wait. Zoom training sessions were hosted, particularly with our older adults, to be sure that as many people as possible could access these conversations, and a large number did.

In September 2020, the congregation began a series on Zoom called “**Awakenings**,” honoring the experience of the Spirit’s awakening, hearing and telling holy stories, and listening for God’s beckoning to transformation in the midst of it all. Among the various awakenings we heard were stories particularly centered around awakening to race and sexuality. Beloved leaders, former and current ministers, and members of all sorts from our congregation offered their heartfelt experiences in and outside the church, speaking vulnerably with lament and love about how the Spirit had awakened them in new ways. With God’s help, we listened carefully to each other. By the time this series concluded in late November after six sessions, not one of us left unchanged.

In April 2021, the congregation gathered again by Zoom for another similar set of conversations called “**Learnings**,” in which we used the anniversary of the pandemic to ask ourselves what we’d learned in a season filled with such disruption of our common life: between the pandemic, racial reckoning, presidential election, and all the socio-political upheaval that surrounded it. Some of us shared our pandemic stories, and all of us were given the emotional and spiritual space to process all we’ve experienced. We concluded in June with the Spirit’s clarion call: *how then shall we live?*

The Pastoral Discernment Group and pastoral staff drew from all the feedback in these two sessions in order to offer recommendations about, as we had asked, how then we shall live. Among the key themes we had heard were a strong love for the way in which members of our church find belonging, a desire to extend that belonging to others in the wider Winston-Salem community, a recognition that the historic disruptions of our world had created an even more profound need for clarity about our identity, and a deep and abiding hopefulness for the future God was setting before us.

Over the course of the summer in what amounted to nearly 30 hours of meeting time and countless emails and phone calls back and forth, the Pastoral Discernment Group and pastoral staff explored what that clarity might look like. We wondered about a statement or a declaration. We pondered a covenant with each other or a series of commitments we’d make. But in the end it was the language of ‘confession’ that best seemed to fit the shape of our obedience, one rooted in the words of our vision statement that has given shape to our church’s life since early 2018: *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.*

As we wrote, we knew this confession wasn't a statement of belief, nor was it a policy or bylaw. We hoped a confession of identity would illuminate a clearer, more vibrant and honest picture of who we are and how we feel called by Jesus to be in the world in this precise season. The audience of this longer-form essay would be primarily external (though wholly woven into our life together), and it would live mostly on our website, but from which, we'd draw phrases, images, stories to bear witness in the public sphere. We envisioned it like a snapshot of the church's imagination and identity as the pandemic recedes, as the 150th anniversary approaches, and as we continue listening carefully to the movement of the Spirit in our midst.

And so in September 2021, the church gathered by Zoom and once in person for the final series in a year-long arc. Called **"Belonging & Becoming,"** this five-session time together began with some of the questions that had punctuated our many months of conversations: *how might our church respond to the urgencies of this moment with a clearer public witness? Most importantly -- who is God calling us to become?* We told stories of seasons of change in our church's life, and shared which gifts from our church's past were most important to draw into the future. We found strength from the resilience of those who have come before us and hope in the curiosity of those who will come behind us. Using the Confession of Identity as our guide, we allowed its claims to invite us to deeper conversations, even concluding with various case studies that asked us to consider how we put certain pieces of the Confession into action.

Within the Confession are **three expressions of our shared identity** which feel profoundly connected to this moment -- (1) our way of being on mission in our urban community, (2) our increasing commitments to racial justice, and (3) our inclusion and celebration of people who identify as LGBTQ. While certainly not the only commitments or expressions of our faith, they are among the most potent and urgent ways that we bear witness to those outside our walls. For many within our congregation, these expressions of Christian identity have been part of our lives for years. But together, these three expressions have bubbled up in our church through many ways recently: meaningful partnerships with other churches and local mission organizations assisting our neighbors in need, book studies about racial justice in Sunday School classes and small groups, space in worship to lament the stain of racism in the church and the world, one-on-one conversations with current or prospective members about our church's safety for folks who identify as LGBTQ, scripture study over several years regarding how we read the Bible using sexuality as a primary case study, and many more.

Of these three expressions of identity, one becomes a newly-stated, public commitment: that, as the Confession names, "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." Because the clear inclusion of LGBTQ persons within those gifts of full membership is a significant, historic part of the statement -- a new public commitment, but not a change in bylaw or policy or spirit -- it offers a moment for joyful reflection. For the stories of our church's courageous, faithful LGBTQ members and friends have offered a beautiful witness to God's bold love and boundless compassion. What a gift it is to offer such a clear word of inclusion in the context of our deeper identity! In making this commitment clear, our church joins the great cloud of witnesses of those who have come before

us: sister churches across downtown (like St. Paul's Episcopal, Augsburg Lutheran, and Home Moravian), sister CBF churches in our city (like Knollwood Baptist and Wake Forest Baptist), and sister CBF churches across the fellowship (a gracious plenty, like First Baptist Asheville, First Baptist Greenville, SC, and First Baptist Macon, Georgia).

As our "Belonging & Becoming" series concluded, the Pastoral Discernment Group and pastoral staff asked for feedback. Emails, comments, questions, and thoughts from nearly 100 members about the Confession layered on top of the more than 20 hours of congregational conversation throughout these 14 months. Our congregation's fingerprints are all over the Confession! Countless members made it more faithful and clear, more rooted in the particulars of our faith and hopeful about where God is leading us. This Confession is both descriptive and aspirational, what is now and what is to be. It unifies us with purpose and priorities, yet represents the nuance of difference and dissent. We don't all agree with every word, yet we commit our full and honest selves to each other, trusting the God in whom "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

The Deacons offered their near-unanimous affirmation of the Confession in late October, and the congregation spent two weeks in two question & answer sessions with members of the Pastoral Discernment Group and pastoral staff. On November 17, the congregation gathered on Zoom to vote by a show of hands, voices, and absentee ballots to affirm the Confession. The vote to affirm the Confession passed with 87% approval.

Earlier this fall, one of our church members asked me a question: "why write a confession of identity now? What is it about this moment that makes it urgent?" I appreciated the thoughtful question, and shared my answer in one of our Belonging & Becoming sessions. For among all the scripture from which we've read, studied, preached, and listened throughout these 14 months, it has been the accounts of the early Christians, so wholly moved by the Spirit as they discovered their identity, who have felt most familiar to me. They too pressed past long-held understandings and commonly-held practices as God's Spirit called them to bold, public, inclusive witness. I had those first followers in mind when I answered his question.

Why now? Because we simply can't *not* speak 'of what we have seen and heard.' Because we must loosen our grip on fear and act abundantly 'with great boldness.' Because for our historically-white, predominantly-straight congregation, the burden of clarity is on us; our siblings have borne that weight for too long. Because the witness of the Christian church in America has become so distorted -- particularly in recent years, even more so during the pandemic -- that we are compelled to make even clearer our convictions. Because it is an act of hospitality to those we meet and an act of love to those already in our fellowship. Because it puts before us the witness of the already & not yet. **Because God's Spirit beckons us ever forward**, each step following in the abundant way of Love.

Together in God's work of Love,
Rev. Emily Hull McGee