



New Church

The Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss Jr., Executive Bishop

General Church of the New Jerusalem

November 28, 2022

Response to Open Letter Regarding LGBTQIA+

Dear Friends,

It has been some months since the Bishop's Office, the Board, and the Clergy received an open letter/petition signed by over eight hundred people asking for "a new approach regarding LGBTQIA+ that encourages more people to come to the Lord through the General Church."¹ As is known, the Board requested, and I convened, a joint Clergy-Board task force aimed at providing a considered response. That response is coming to you in two forms: this letter from me, and a report of the Task Force's activities.

Who am I speaking to? I am responding primarily to those of you who signed the open letter petition. I hope that you hear a respectful and full addressing of your concerns. I am aware, however, that many people are listening who have views substantially different from those expressed in the petition, and many others are listening who would place themselves in the so-called middle who want us to find a loving and just way forward. I am striving to write with them also in mind, while I address my thoughts directly to those who signed the petition.

What do I aim to accomplish in this response? To underscore a message of welcome to all who wish to worship the Lord and strive to live a life according to His teachings within the General Church. To demonstrate where I believe we can grow and learn for the better as a church. To state transparently where I believe we cannot adopt changes requested within your petition. To talk from the heart about this subject that has caused such hurt and conflict within the church.

Please take note of an indication of what will happen next, at the end of my letter, including an opportunity for response.

My response has five parts.

1. Personal acknowledgments, conclusions, and commitments

I want to start with a personal perspective. Baring my soul a bit, I wish to share how I am holding all of this. I don't think I can find the words to adequately convey how deeply I have felt the conflict that has ensued since I published my article in *New Church Life*. I believe many people reading this would say the same for themselves. I thank those who took the time to

¹ Open Letter - Requests to the General Church of the New Jerusalem Regarding LGBTQIA+, received June 21, 2022

engage with me—on all sides of this issue. All of it has led to a great deal of subsequent research and prayerful reflection. Here are some of the things that have come out of that process for me:

First, I want to acknowledge publicly, as I have to many people in one-on-one settings, that there are things I would say differently in my *New Church Life* article,² if I were to write it today. For one, I didn't mean to imply that certain people are an abomination, but unfortunately, that is the way it came across to many readers. Likewise, I didn't mean to say that people who identify along the LGBTQIA+ spectrum are, by definition, sinners—any more than every one of us who need to work on our own hereditary inclinations in an effort to follow the Lord to heaven. And I certainly don't want people to feel pushed away from the church. If I were to write the article again, I would be careful to say things differently, as a way of ensuring against this kind of messaging.

I also want to acknowledge that there are things I do not know about this multi-faceted subject, and to commit to being open to ongoing learning that helps me continue growing along lines of wisdom and love. I have learned a great deal in the past few months, and for that I am grateful. I encourage and support this kind of learning across our church congregations and schools.

I want to state clearly that it is unacceptable for people to resort to violence against people who identify along the LGBTQIA+ identity spectrum. All too often we see horrific examples of targeted attacks on innocent people. We can all feel called to consider our own ways of supporting further protections and safety for all people, denouncing discriminatory violence whenever it rears its ugly head.

This conflict has found me calling on my own values and respecting the values of others. In the many conversations I have had on this topic, I have readily perceived the value of compassion and fair treatment, the value of honoring the directives of the Word, the value of change and growth, the value of respect, the value of protecting people from hurt, the value of worship, and the value of spiritual community. For me it helps to identify the value from which I perceive people to be speaking, because it helps me bond to that value and to share in response something of what I value. I'll share that I place pretty high importance on the "affirmative principle" spoken of in the Writings—which includes honoring what the Word says, and actively looking for the good things I see in the people in front of me.

Like so many of you, this debate calls us to hold several things at once. So, together with a love and respect for people, I want to continue to love and promote the teachings about marriage offered to us in the pages of *Conjugal Love*. I support all of our congregations and schools in their responsibility to make those teachings known, inviting people to consider them for themselves.

Among those teachings are the ones about men and women, leading me to pray that our church is a place where the best of masculinity and femininity as described in the Word can be nurtured, and where people—young people especially—can feel encouraged to live into the

² "Standing for Marriage in Today's World: A Church Perspective," *New Church Life*, January/February 2022.

best version of femininity or masculinity that they can. At the same time, my heart goes out to people who experience forms of gender dysphoria. I want us as a church to be open and willing to hear what people's life experiences and view of themselves has led them to conclude, and to be ready to help with teachings from the Word.

The Word does challenge us, though, which is something I believe all of us can see. So, for example, my understanding of doctrine makes it difficult to separate my thinking from some of the warnings I see in the Writings about same-sex sexual activity. I work to incorporate them into my thinking with prayerful openness as to why our loving Lord gave them to us the way He did.

I have also been wrestling with the frequent calls in the Word to a life of repentance, knowing from many of you that you hear judgment at the very mention of that term in this context. What I offer is the perspective that it is not our place as individuals to point the finger and tell others what they need to repent of. I hope we would agree, however, that the path of repentance is, for all of us, ultimately one that we must walk. I have come to see a loving God who is leading all of us to a life of consistent change, whatever the issue is before us, with increasing clarity on what He leads us toward and what He asks us to resist.

Hard on the heels of that reflection though, I have been personally considering the weight and impact of two New Testament injunctions from the Lord that seem particularly pertinent. Both have to do with judgment. The first is the Lord's command to "judge not that you be not judged" (Matthew 7:1). We know that we are not to make spiritual judgments, and we are not to think the worst of people or to impute negative motives that may not be there. One teaching identifies the spiritual challenge here as treating people from a spirit of charity (*Apocalypse Explained* 746:16). Another draws attention particularly to the context of marriage and the all-too-easy judgments we can make of other people's marriage-related or sexual issues (*Conjugal Love* 523, 531:e).

The second is the injunction that comes to us in the gospel of John, where the Lord says, "Do not judge according to the appearance, but judge with righteous judgment" (John 7:24). We are not forbidden from making judgments about specific actions or moral behaviors, or from engaging in a kind of discernment that is wise. What is forbidden is failing to look deeper and consider carefully. Maybe we could agree that we fail at this at times. We hear what we hear, not always the intended meaning. We act on first impressions. We neglect to take circumstances into consideration or even contemplate why a person may have acted the way they did—or identifies the way they do. I believe there is a lot here that the Lord is calling us to examine. There is an aspiration to a kind of view of each other that is heavenly and human.

Finally, I rely heavily on the teachings given in the work *Divine Providence* that demonstrate how the Lord regards and leads us all. It never ceases to amaze me how patient and loving and wise the Lord is in His guidance of each human being. He regards what is eternal in all that He does. He forgives and provides a way forward, consistently and without ever holding any ill-will or grudge against any of us. He knows everything that is going on with us—all extenuating circumstances and regrettable situations ("permissions")—and leads us in that context. He can bring goodness out of any struggle that we endure. I pray that my thoughts and

actions are guided by that attitude and eternal perspective and respect for freedom. I want to do what I can to encourage it within the church.

Thank you for letting me share these things. I hope they invite your personal reflections in the midst of this tender and challenging subject.

2. The heart of the matter

At this point I want to put on more of my organizational hat and describe for you some of the outcomes of the task force process that has been ongoing for the past few months.

In considering the open letter in its entirety, those of us on the Task Force found ourselves reaching for the heart of the matter. What is it that is being called for? In the vein of active listening, I believe it is a heartfelt appeal for consideration of human beings. There is a perception, right or wrong, that people identifying along the LGBTQIA+ spectrum are judged and unwanted. I hear and absorb the feedback that there is an apparent lack of compassionate extension into the lives of people whose experience does not appear to align with the vision of marriage presented for the New Church. We are wise to examine ourselves based on feedback, taking sincere inventory of what in ourselves and our church may not be heavenly in terms of our regard for our fellow human beings.

It is with this in mind that I bring forward some of the statements in the petition to which I believe we can respond affirmatively—which again were explored at length in our task force process. Are there differences in doctrinal understanding (Request 1)? Yes. I speak to that in the next section of this letter. Has there been hurt (Request 2)? I have heard and personally absorbed it in the many, many conversations I have had since publishing my article in *New Church Life* and have acknowledged my part in that earlier in this letter. Is there support for congregations to be welcoming to people in the LGBTQIA+ community (Request 5), and are General Church ministers encouraged to pastorally serve people who identify along this spectrum (Request 7)? Yes to both, although I note that it is not an unqualified yes.

We know that the Lord loves everyone all the time, and we know that He consistently calls us to work with one another from a place of love.

3. A challenge and a blessing—we see things differently

There is another “heart of the matter” that we could all consider, and that is a difference of perspective on the teachings within the Word that apply—or how they apply. Let me bring forward some examples that most of us could recognize, aimed simply at elucidating the polarized challenge we face in this tender subject. Everyone I have talked to aspires to approach others from a place of love in accordance with second great commandment (Matthew 22:39), but some conclude that love means accepting where people are and celebrating their identity, while others conclude that love sometimes is expressed in a desire to see someone released from a struggle if possible. Another example: Some see a consistent and pervasive truth that marriage is created by the Lord to be experienced by one man and one woman, and do not see room within the church to provide for same-sex marriage. Others

conclude that there is room for such provision. Another: Some see that acting on same-sex attraction is forbidden in the Word. Others see Biblical prohibitions as symbolic of hurtful human reflexes that all of us should avoid, but are no longer directed to our physical actions. And further: Some see a societal attack on a religious and New Church vision of marriage, while others conclude this debate doesn't have much to do with marriage.

At issue, then, is how we navigate such stark differences in doctrinal conclusions. I offer two foundational premises that we can work with. One is that each individual has a sacred right to approach the Word of the Lord and draw meaning from it for their lives. Faith is, at the end of the day, personal, and the church is here to help a person's faith journey, not dictate what it must be. I believe this freedom to approach the Word for oneself, and the encouragement to do so, is questioned at this day. I am here to say I absolutely support this freedom.

There is, however, a second foundational premise, and that is the "doctrine of the church" or the shared understanding of the Word that the church offers. I believe that the General Church is blessed by the heritage of many generations of lay people and priests who have gone to the Word to see certain consistent patterns. This doctrine of the church, or shared understanding of the Word, is always subject to change and correction by subsequent turning to the Word.³ But it is offered as a resource for people in their faith journey. That includes the teachings about marriage that we have been given, and how they relate to the expanding reality of people sharing that they or their loved ones identify along the LGBTQIA+ spectrum.

4. Results of review

So, what do we do when there is disagreement in the realm of the doctrine of the church, or the best shared understanding of the Word? We turn back to the Word for guidance. In light of this intense debate, clergy and laity have gone back to the Word to study and reflect and will continue to do so. One outcome, aided by a set of clergy meetings in June and confirmed afterwards by an anonymous poll of clergy,⁴ is almost universal agreement by the General Church clergy that marriage is designed by the Lord to be experienced between one man and one woman. The clergy is also in almost universal agreement, based on its best understanding of the Word, that General Church priests are only authorized to perform marriages between one man and one woman. That means we do not see permission to answer affirmatively to some of the requests in the petition, particularly regarding same-sex marriage and admissions to Theological School. It also influences how we aim to use our church-owned

³ This, as a matter of interest, is relevant to the Order and Organization statement that neither the Bishop nor the clergy should make statements on doctrine that bind the conscience of the church. This is not speaking about the Bishop or clergy sharing their best current understanding of the Word—that is our job. But it is a recognition that it is nothing more than our best current understanding, always open to challenge by subsequent return to the Word itself. For more on this, please see the Task Force Report.

⁴ A clergy poll is a new way of asking clergy regarding their current thinking on doctrinal matters. It is intended to be used sparingly and is not intended to interfere with further study of the Word. In this case, input was sought and provided to the Bishop's Office anonymously for the sake of our response to the current debate before the church on marriage and LGBTQIA+ matters. This input was also shared with the clergy for their own awareness of the current thinking of their colleagues on these important matters.

facilities, our respectful engagement with pastors and teachers as to what they may teach, and the parameters around which we organizationally respond to a call to promote inclusive language. I do not wish to offend or disappoint in saying these things, rather to fulfill the aim of stating transparently where I believe we cannot adopt changes requested within the petition.

Returning to our review, what has also happened is an assessment of the way we present teachings from the Word about marriage, gender, and sexuality. There is a concerted effort toward greater sensitization as to how they land in people's lives. Also ongoing is study of appropriate pastoral approaches within the General Church to serve people who identify differently. A significant portion of the recent Council of the Clergy meetings just referenced was devoted to this topic. It would be false of me to claim that the clergy agrees on what is appropriate, but I do see sincere efforts to seek within the Word ways in which the church, and pastors, can help (Request 7). That search will, I believe, continue.

Finally, there has been a reasonably thorough review of employment related matters. Supporting employees in their best work is essential to our success. Part of that is affirming people's freedom to seek personal and professional guidance from the Word, as well as underscoring their rights and protections as employees (Request 3). One related project that is ongoing is to draw attention to employment expectations that have long been articulated in our Employee Handbooks, and to clarify those expectations where needed. This includes a professional willingness to support the teachings about marriage that are a part of the doctrine of the church just mentioned. More information on employee matters can be found in the Task Force Report.

5. Leaning on our values

As I draw to a close, I want to draw attention to the stated core values of the General Church (available [here](#)), with a few comments on how they can help us in our endeavor to work together as a church. There are eight of them, but I really want to focus on three.

The first is about the Word. We value "turning to the threefold-Word as the source and foundation for all that we do." All of us are encouraged to go to the Word for ourselves to draw meaning from it for our lives. I want to affirm again that all of us need to keep turning to the Word with a prayer to the Lord for enlightenment. We can be led to greater wisdom.

A second value that I point to is this: "Developing people's faith in the Lord and trust in His providence." The church is here to encourage all of us to trust the Lord. It is here to help people gain a sense of the Lord's providential care of us and to see ways in which we can best cooperate. We know that the Lord brings good things out of challenges like the one we are going through. I pray that we see some of that goodness as we strive to worship together.

The rest of the list of core values is also worthy of reflection, but the final value I wish to focus on is the last: "Welcoming all who wish to explore these values to participate in the life of the church." It is important to me that we reflect on this core value and challenge ourselves to consider how well we embrace it. In many ways I believe we do, evidenced by the many people

across the church who will tell you how much they love their local congregation and pastor(s). The same is often said of our schools.

There is, of course, room for improvement. And there is the testimony at issue in this debate that some do not feel welcome. I believe it is useful to call attention to this stated value and to rededicate ourselves to it.

I pray that we can find our stride by drawing on these values. This debate has been painful and divisive. It will take work to continue listening to each other and caring for one another. At the heart of our success will be a belief that we all need the Lord and the healing teachings of His Word. We can all benefit from connection with the Lord in worship. We can all see ourselves as seekers of the Lord in the church and find ways to rejoice when others sincerely wish to find direction for their lives alongside us.

In terms of what happens next, I share two things. First, we will gather input and feedback on this letter as well as the Task Force Report. You are invited to share your feedback with your pastor(s) or with a member of the clergy with whom you are connected, or by writing in via memberservices@newchurch.org. We would hope to receive this feedback by January 15, 2023, allowing for people to read, take a break for the Christmas holidays if they so wish, and provide what input they believe is useful. The second is that the Task Force intends to meet with the Board and representatives of the Clergy to process the entire process, including this further response.

Thank you for caring for what happens within the General Church. Thank you for reading this response, and for reviewing the report of the Task Force.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Peter".

Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss, Jr