

## **Background Information**

Prepared by the North Valley Transition Task Force

After 12 years of discernment, West Hills Friends Church's (WHFC) monthly meeting approved two distinct statements in 2008. The first was on the topic of "Human Sexuality." In that statement, WHFC expressed the characteristics of healthy sexual relationships regardless of sexual orientation. In the second statement, on "Authority," WHFC declared: "It is our experience and testimony that God works through people without regard for race, age, gender or sexual orientation." WHFC made their discernment known to Northwest Yearly Meeting (NWYM), requesting that we discuss the NWYM statement on human sexuality in the Faith & Practice.

After several years during which NWYM was not yet ready to discuss the human sexuality statement, annual sessions in 2012-2014 included small groups in which people shared opinions and stories regarding human sexuality and the statement on human sexuality in the Faith & Practice. In July 2013, WHFC was found to be out of harmony with the Faith & Practice. A two-year plan was developed, during which time the elders and WHFC would work together to see if they could overcome the division. NWYM invited meetings to discern about a proposed Faith & Practice revision of the human sexuality statement to bring to annual sessions in 2014.

North Valley went through a discernment process during 2013-2014 regarding the proposed Faith & Practice revision to the human sexuality statement. We spent time sharing in groups, hosting a speaker and video series, and discerning together in business sessions. We sent a minute to NWYM annual sessions in 2014 that stated that we were not in agreement about aspects of human sexuality, but we were in agreement that we wanted to stay together as a meeting and as a yearly meeting.

At annual sessions in 2014, NWYM could not come to consensus about the revision to the Faith & Practice, therefore the old statement remained the official position of NWYM.

Since the NWYM Faith & Practice statement remained the same, the NWYM elders worked with West Hills throughout 2014-2015. The elders determined that WHFC was out of compliance with the human sexuality statement in Faith & Practice, the elders felt compelled to release West Hills from NWYM (July 2015).

Eight NWYM Meetings, including North Valley, appealed the NWYM Elders' decision (fall 2015).

The appeals were presented to the NWYM Administrative Council, and this group worked to discern next steps (2016). After finding themselves unable to come to unity, the NWYM Administrative Council brought the issue of releasing West Hills to the NWYM business meeting floor for discussion/discernment (summer 2016). No consensus was reached.

There was a meeting of yearly meeting representatives in Newberg, December 9-10, 2016. This meeting still could not come to consensus on the best way to proceed.

In the meantime, other meetings also minuted welcoming and affirming stances, coming out of compliance with the current Faith & Practice (four churches total: Camas, Eugene, Klamath Falls, West Hills). This changed the nature of the discussion: it was no longer WHFC alone, but all four of these meetings have now minuted a position regarding human sexuality other than the position described in the Faith & Practice.

The NWYM Administrative Council enacted a provision (5.05.09) in the NWYM Faith & Practice allowing the NWYM Administrative Council to make decisions without approval of representatives if the decision is time sensitive.

The NWYM Administrative Council decided to restructure into two yearly meetings. This decision was shared with NWYM representatives at the Mid-Year Representatives' Meeting January 27-28, 2017. Many representatives opposed the decision to restructure NWYM, but the Administrative Council decision stood, because the representatives could not come to consensus regarding an alternative.

### **What does NVFC need to decide?**

Because of the yearly meeting decision to "restructure," all churches in NWYM have decisions to make. (See background documents at the end of this document for more information.)

Options thus far identified include:

1. NVFC could remain a part of NWYM, which will be organized around the current Faith and Practice, including the current statement regarding human sexuality. This may include churches who have internal disagreement but have agreed to align their practices with current NWYM Faith and Practice.
2. NVFC could leave NWYM. In this restructuring period, churches that leave keep ownership of buildings and property. If NVFC leaves NWYM, we could choose to join a yet-to-be-formed new yearly meeting, which will likely include churches who affirm full participation of LGBTQ+<sup>1</sup> people and same-sex marriage. It may also include churches with internal disagreement on the issue, although it is unknown at this time to what extent its Faith and Practice will address human sexuality.
  - a. After joining another yearly meeting, we would be eligible to join a larger Friends body such as Evangelical Friends Church International (EFCI), Friends United Meeting (FUM), or Friends General Conference (FGC), but we are unable to join these as an independent meeting.

---

<sup>1</sup> LGBTQ+ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning individuals or identities. The + refers to other sexual orientations such as asexual or pansexual, intersex individuals, other gender identities, and those who feel their identity or orientation is somewhere on the queer spectrum but does not fit into one of these categories.

3. NVFC could choose to be an independent Friends congregation, choosing non-official relationships and partnerships with camps, global outreach ministries, and Friends churches in both NWYM and the newly formed yearly meeting.

These are two separate but related decisions: what we believe about human sexuality, and which yearly meeting (if any) we feel led to affiliate with. The process for discernment on these topics is yet to be defined.

### **What central issues are at stake?**

As we have gone through the appeal process, it has become increasingly clear that differing beliefs regarding LGBTQ+ people is not the only area of disagreement. Deeper discernment needs to occur around the following:

1. Differing views of the the role of the Faith & Practice as either a compliance document to which we must adhere, or as a living document describing the shared beliefs of meetings in the NWYM. Deeper questions emerge regarding the nature of scriptural authority in tandem with current leading by the Holy Spirit, and authority and interpretation of the Faith & Practice.
2. The need to do more work to identify what is essential to make our yearly meeting a corporate body with shared values, alongside the freedom to discern at the local level.
3. Serious questions remain regarding whether appropriate Quaker process was honored and followed during this NWYM discernment process. Friends have consistently practiced seeking the mind of Christ together during meetings for worship with a concern for business since the 1660s, and this corporate process is outlined in the NWYM Faith & Practice. The procedures regarding how to deal with proposed changes to the Faith & Practice, appeals from meetings regarding the dismissal of others from our body, and how to proceed when there are major disagreements are less clear in the Faith & Practice, leading to misunderstandings and mistrust around proper process.
4. Which portions of Christian belief are essential and which are less-than-essential. Some see the division of the last few years as distracting the church from our mission. The reorganization may offer a way to get unstuck, so that those with different beliefs can move forward in the directions they feel called.

### **Background documents available:**

- Letter from NVFC to NWYM regarding the proposed Faith & Practice revision to the human sexuality statement (June 2014, see next page)
- [NWYM elders' letter releasing West Hills](#) Friends Church (Jul. 2015)
- [NVFC appeal](#) regarding the elders' letter releasing West Hills Friends Church (August 2015) and [appeals or supporting minutes from other meetings](#)
- [Administrative Council announcement of YM restructuring](#) (Jan. 2017)
- The current [Faith and Practice statements on human sexuality](#)
- The current [Mission Statement](#) of NVFC

**[North Valley letter to NWYM re: F&P revision to human sexuality statement]**

To Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends,

June 19, 2014

Last summer the clerk of Northwest Yearly Meeting asked local churches to do discernment around the revised statement of human sexuality in Faith and Practice. The North Valley Friends elders felt led to invite our community into an intentional discernment process concerning same-sex relationships. The elders named values that would guide us through a discernment process and asked the pastoral team to give leadership to that process. On Wednesday nights in the fall we listened to eight presentations and to each other share our journeys in regards to same-sex attraction and relationships. We then spent December and January in individual, prayerful reflection. Finally, we gathered for two meetings for worship for business to discern God's leading concerning the revised Faith and Practice statement.

At the end of this discernment work, we are unable to come to agreement over the proposed change in the Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice regarding human sexuality. We are divided over the issue of committed, same-sex relationships with many of us seeing that this is a God-given option, many of us seeing this as prohibited by Scripture, and many of us somewhere in the middle. We are also divided on whether to include a list of sexual distortions or not.

The spirit of our listening together has been passionate and respectful. We are united in our desire to be open to all people, including members of the LGBTQ+ community. We are united in our commitment to stay together, even during this time of differing perspectives. We are united in our commitment to understanding the Scriptures and letting them guide us. We are united in our belief that God speaks and leads God's people. We are willing to continue talking and listening, to wait for the Spirit to lead us into truth, even if it takes time and requires patience.

We do not approve the proposed statement as a first reading although we agree that it is more "seasoned with grace" than our current statement. While we do not accept the proposed statement we believe it is better than what is currently in our Faith and Practice. Therefore, we propose that the new statement be used as a place holder, effective immediately, until we come to the statement that can be used as a first reading.

In the midst of our process, several questions have emerged that we believe can help provide guidance to our overall discernment work as a Yearly Meeting.

1 – What is the intent of the "What Friends Believe" chapter of Faith and Practice? Is it intended to be **prescriptive** and thus play the role of gatekeeper and accountability for compliance? Or is it intended to be **descriptive** and thus play the role of describing who we are as a Yearly Meeting community? If the intent is descriptive, the statement on human sexuality would need to reflect the breadth of the community

2 – Historically, Friends have understood that we can be unified as one body without being in complete agreement on all matters. This is the difference between unity and unanimity. How does this understanding inform our process and help move toward an outcome that has integrity?

3 – We have a concern about congregations who have indicated an intention to leave NWYM, depending on the community's sense of God's leading in this matter, whether that leading is too supportive or not supportive enough of the LGBTQ+ community. We are concerned this intention could have the effect of inadvertently inserting inappropriate power into the process, as it suggests the removal of both relationship and financial support. Such indications could make it difficult to maintain an open, centered, and safe discernment process, free of powerful distractions. Is there a way to alleviate this pressure?

4 – We also are concerned that the NWYM Elders' work with West Hills Friends Meeting around related matters could be a significant distraction. Is there a way that this work can be put on hold until the matter of the Faith and Practice statement on human sexuality is completed?

Respectfully,

North Valley Friends Church