

Disciples' broad welcome to gays is not a change in policy, says leader

by [John Dart](#) in the [August 21, 2013](#) issue

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) approved a resolution at its recent general assembly in Orlando, Florida, that called upon its churches to affirm that no grounds exist to bar Christians from fellowship or service within congregations because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Nine church-related LGBT groups, including the National Religious Leadership Roundtable, cheered on July 18 the “major step” taken by the Disciples during their July 13–17 assembly. A Lutheran gay-rights group congratulated the Disciples for “eliminating barriers for service from pew to pulpit, coffee hour to the altar.”

Seeking to allay concerns of church members opposed to gay clergy and same-sex marriage, Sharon Watkins, general minister and president of the Disciples, posted an online letter July 19 to church members outlining what the resolution did not say.

“It is not a policy change,” Watkins said. Local congregations will not be requested to establish or change their policies on gays or lesbians in their churches, she said.

The resolution “is not a statement of ‘unwelcome’ for Disciples who did not support the resolution,” she wrote. Churches are not required to change their policies on ordination, and “your pastor is not required to bless same-gender marriages,” she wrote.

“It is not a theological mandate,” added Watkins. “It does not say we have the same biblical understanding of sexual orientation or gender identity.” As noted by the resolution, she said, “there have always been gay and straight, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons who participate fully in the life and leadership of the church.”

Watkins’s letter called the resolution “an important vote” for the Indianapolis-based denomination. A measure adopted at the 1997 General Assembly urged members to research and reflect on bringing gay and lesbian members into the full life and ministry of the church.

The new resolution was a “sense of the assembly” measure, reflecting a simple majority of those gathered at the Orlando assembly. The statement was co-sponsored by 20 congregations, eight of them in California.