

*“God wants individuals to be who and what they were created to be in perfect freedom. This freedom is not self-indulgent, but to serve the community and the world out of love for God (Galatians 5:13).”*

*“The Covenant Church cherishes this freedom in Christ and recognizes, as one of our forebears put it, that freedom is a gift and the last of all gifts to mature.”*

*-Excerpts from ECC Affirmations- Freedom in Christ*

The year 2023 marks twenty-one years of Quest Church being a member of the Evangelical Covenant Church. This year is also our last. A maturing church is a free church—free to embody a people who belong to God, to embrace the differences in one’s community, and to constantly reimagine what God’s presence looks like in the world. A free church is a mature church, able to hold differences and remain centered in who we are in Christ, even as we discern the new ways God is meeting us.

We have discerned that, to be the body of Christ, we must embrace the fullness of God’s life in all of our members, including our LGBTQIA+ siblings. This belief emerges from our identity and values as an ECC church, not despite this identity and these values. We leave the denomination grieved that the ECC refuses to recognize God’s work in our midst, and yet hopeful for the ways the Spirit is moving in our community.

Quest’s founders had a vision of belonging through the practical work of justice, compassion, spiritual renewal, and community. Quest had audacious dreams of being a presence in the community for local businesses, unhoused neighbors, emerging artists and musicians, and of being a place where holistic belonging was valued in word and deed.

Quest’s history is one of generosity and radical inclusion in response to the call of the Spirit. In 2007, Rev. Ray Bartel and the congregation of Interbay Covenant Church (where Quest held its weekly services) envisioned a radical multiplying legacy for its congregation. The vision ultimately led them to “die to itself,” giving everything the church owned and who they were over to Quest. Freedom wasn’t digging into what was or who they had been, but believing that radical transformation could open the possibility of an even more expansive move of the Spirit. It is a story of a secure and free people who leaned into a vision of a kin-dom not rooted in scarcity but abundance.

This continues to be our story. It means commitments to justice, racial and cultural diversity, practical care for the poor and marginalized, and, most recently, becoming fully affirming of our LGBTQIA+ siblings (in theology and practice) in 2021. Over time, Quest quickly found itself not only stating its commitment to Micah 6:8 (act justly, love mercy, walk humbly) but embodying what it means to actually value just systems and liberative theology more holistically. We have been and are fundamentally, an ECC Church.

Quest embodies the ECC’s vision and values, participating in its commitments to the non-essentials of faith: infant and believer baptisms, racial justice, women in all positions of leadership, local presence, a commitment to discipling the next generation, a deep love of

Scripture, and being a diverse and reconciling community. We have stayed in the disciplinary process for nearly two years because we believe we are ECC.

We had hoped that the ECC would consider the impact of cutting off one of its limbs in the name of holding fast to a position on same-sex marriage (a non-essential of faith), a resolution paper that was voted on nearly three decades ago. Surely, history could reveal similar patterns and possibilities of cultural transformation and re-readings of Scripture, e.g. ordaining women in the late 1970's, movement toward racial righteousness, and the intentional multicultural expressions in the life of the ECC in more recent years. We know we have the capacity and the receipts that demonstrate how cultural change and theological shifts are possible—that our identities are not static. We believe this moment is no different.

However, as with most civil rights movements and liberative theological shifts, it requires the voices and bodies of the ones being advocated for to be centered and heard every step of the way. Over the past year, we have taken the time to listen to our LGBTQIA+ siblings at Quest, who are also members of our core leadership, and see no other option but to leave and do so voluntarily.

As a multiracial and multicultural church, and as an Asian American woman who has personally faced anti-women-in-leadership decisions within the denomination, it is a wonder that churches are now being removed or strong-armed to “voluntarily” leave over convictions on human sexuality. It speaks volumes to where the ECC's sense of urgency and values lie—clearly not around upholding convictions of anti-racism or gender equity. Somehow, the ECC has become a space that prioritizes doctrinal uniformity on a singular issue over relational unity in areas that are non-essentials of faith.

Quest remains hopeful as we disaffiliate from the ECC. While the ECC will always be a part of our story, we are in a new season of eagerly making room to participate in what we believe is an expansive kin-dom where everyone belongs.

We acknowledge that dismantling systems of oppression must be engaged both within and outside of institutional walls. While Quest chooses to seek life and liberation outside the ECC denominational walls, we are rooting for leaders and churches who remain within. We pray you'll move with conviction, courage, and generosity, reminded again that the institution is capable of change. We hope for Awaken Church, who is on the ballot for removal this month. We also hope for the many churches and clergy we know who are barely hanging on. Your vote holds a legacy. What story will it tell?

I truly hope our individual and collective legacies will rehearse the story of God's love, abundance, and radical inclusion at every turn.

May it be so,

Pastor Gail Song Bantum