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Local school: We stand for love, so here's a closer look at our LGBTQ admission policy



Our country and our state needs healing, and the church should be one of the places where this takes place. Our citizens are rightfully crying out for leadership that responds and acts with conviction, civility and compassion to some of the most pressing issues of our day. All of us, from every sphere of life, should endeavor to this; particularly when it comes to the education of our children.

Normally our church does not speak out in the press about our work in the Central Florida community. We prefer to have our actions in the community speak for us. But we find ourselves a central player in an ongoing series of columns by the Sentinel's Scott Maxwell. His columns object to parents choosing to use tax credit scholarships at schools that will not admit LGBTQ students.

This is an important concern we think merits our attention and should be addressed. Because we have been mentioned in every column, we felt it important to speak out. We appreciate the opportunity to respond.

The columns actually did us a tremendous favor by pointing out that the "Lifestyle Policy" in our school's application states that parents who are LGBTQ cannot send their children to our school. This policy does not reflect the actual practice at our school, and we have eliminated it to reflect our actual practices.

We do not discriminate in any way when admitting children into our academy. We do, however, teach orthodox Biblical principles — including that we believe that marriage is between a man and a woman. We also have a code of conduct consistent with our biblical worldview — any student engaging in sexual misconduct is subject to expulsion. Our parents and students understand these convictions very well.

Christ has taught us and it is our deepest conviction and practice that every child should be loved and respected, whomever they are. Every child is created in the image of God and is worthy of human dignity. Moreover, all our students know that we will treat them with respect and do not allow anyone to be bullied. They know that our teachers and staff work very hard to support their success.

I wish we would have been contacted in reference to the columns so we could

appropriately address any concerns about our church's and academy's posture. We could have shared how we don't just talk about our church being an instrument of God's love, we try to make that love real in our community every day — including in the LGBTQ community.

During the Pulse tragedy, our church did all we could to help. We immediately sent pastors and chaplains to comfort the victims' families. We called on our parishioners to donate blood until we were told no more was needed.

As very kindly reported by the Sentinel, hundreds came to our church to pray for the victims as we stood in prayers with members of the LGBTQ community, and we also held a funeral at our church for one of the victims of the tragic shooting. As reported elsewhere, I offered prayers at the Equality Florida vigil shortly after the tragedy, which I did without equivocation knowing this was the compassionate thing to be done. We still have hundreds of letters that our church received from around the country including from LGBTQ citizens thanking us for our actions during this trying time.

We care about all children in our community no matter who they are or where they go to school. This is why our congregation supports students both in public schools and private academies. As a pastor at a church with an academy and with dozens of public-school teachers in our congregation, we

believe we should invest in children no matter where they go to school.

Every day we work and pray for creative solutions that move beyond debates where there are winners and losers or a them-versus-us struggle but where all children and schools can win. We recently received an award from the Orange County Public Schools for our partnership with our local elementary school, a district school in an economically challenged neighborhood. Every week we send backpacks full of food home with children at the elementary school so their families will be able to eat over the weekend. We provide academic mentoring for children in our neighboring school. When a tragic murder affected the school, our congregation was there to provide support and comfort.

We believe these actions show who we are as a church and school. We regret that one page from our school application gave a false impression, and again we thank the Sentinel for pointing it out to us so we could clarify our position. We hope that these columns do not result in companies ending their support of the program. That would only result in poor, mostly minority children being forced out of schools where they are thriving — including the LGBTQ children at our school.

The Rev. Dr. Nino Gonzalez is the pastor of Calvary City Church in Orlando, home of Calvary City Academy and Preschool.