

A PASTORAL LETTER TO THE IOWA ANNUAL CONFERENCE

April 26, 2019

Grace and peace to the holy and faithful saints in Christ Jesus in Iowa!

I share this letter with you in convicted humility, knowing that I am a sinner, continually falling short of God's glory and standing in need of God's grace. None of us knows the will of God completely, and none of us is able to perfectly reflect God's unconditional love for all of God's children. My hope as a Christ follower and a bishop is to humbly share the Good News of Jesus Christ and reflect the love of Jesus in ways that help others to open their hearts to hear God's voice and live transformed lives.

As many of you know, the February Special Called General Conference in St. Louis was devoted exclusively to our denominational disagreements around human sexuality. General Conference delegates voted 438 to 384 to approve the Traditional Plan, which strengthens the enforcement of bans on same-sex weddings and the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals. At the same time, the General Conference also approved a subsequent motion to request a declaratory decision by our United Methodist Judicial Council on the "constitutionality, meaning, application, and effect" of the Traditional Plan.

A second item for the Judicial Council was a request from the United Methodist Council of Bishops for a declaratory decision on the constitutionality, meaning, application, and effect of Petition 90066, which was one of the proposed "exit plans" allowing local churches to leave the denomination.

As the Judicial Council met this week in Evanston, Illinois, I was praying and pondering the Gospel lesson from John 20:19-31 for this Sunday, April 28.

On the first day of the week, when Jesus was raised from the dead, the disciples met behind closed doors because they were afraid of what the Jewish authorities might do

to them if discovered. Suddenly, Jesus appeared among them and said, "Peace be with you." When Jesus showed them the wounds in his hands and side, they were filled with joy, whereupon Jesus breathed upon them the Holy Spirit.

When Thomas arrived, he wouldn't believe that his friends had seen the Lord and demanded proof. After Jesus showed Thomas his hands and side, all Thomas could say was, "My Lord and my God." And Jesus chided him, saying, "Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe."

Just as the disciples did not always recognize Jesus or fully understand who he is, so you and I do not always recognize Christ in one another. Yet Jesus continues to call us to trust, to believe that we are all God's precious children, and to act in ways that affirm that of God which lives in each one of us.

The Judicial Council Rulings that were released today declared that, while some parts of the Traditional Plan approved at General Conference are unconstitutional, the rest of the plan is constitutional. You can read about the Judicial Council decisions in this [United Methodist News](#) article and in [this summary of the decisions, with wording from considered petitions](#).

- As was approved in February, clergy who perform same-sex weddings will be required to take a one-year involuntary leave of absence without pay. If they officiate at a subsequent same-sex marriage, their clergy credentials will be removed.
- Boards of Ordained Ministry will be required to examine and not recommend candidates who do not meet standards regarding human sexuality. The Plan also prohibits bishops from commissioning or ordaining those determined to be self-avowed practicing homosexuals.
- In addition, the Traditional Plan has now expanded the definition of "self-avowed practicing homosexual" to include people living in a same-sex marriage, domestic partnership, or civil union or a person who publicly states that she or he is a practicing homosexual.
- In a separate ruling, the Judicial Council approved an exit strategy for local churches wanting to leave the denomination that requires three things:

1. Disaffiliation approval by a two-thirds majority of members present voting at the local church conference
2. Establishment of conditions of disaffiliation by the conference board of trustees between a local church and the annual conference.
3. Approval of the disaffiliation by a simple majority of members of the annual conference present and voting.

Bishop Ken Carter, president of the Council of Bishops, [has issued a letter in response to the Judicial Council rulings that you can read here.](#)

It is important to know that General Conference 2020 will take place in Minneapolis from May 5 to May 15. Any clergy and lay members of General Conference, as well as United Methodist groups, are invited to submit petitions related to human sexuality or other disciplinary matters. Instructions for online submission of petitions will be available in the near future and will be published on the Iowa Annual Conference website.

The decisions of the 2019 General Conference have been perceived by many as appropriate. Others, however, see the decisions as excessively punitive, sending a clear message to the world that The United Methodist Church does not welcome all and is perpetuating injustice. This is especially concerning because many young adults today in the United States, especially, have grown up in a culture where diversity is mandated in schools and the workplace and intolerance against the LGBTQIA community is not accepted. They will not attend a church that excludes others from full participation.

At the same time, The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth. *The 2016 Book of Discipline* says (**¶4. Article IV. Inclusiveness of the Church**), “All persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, upon baptism be admitted as baptized members, and upon taking vows declaring the Christian faith, become professing members in any local church in the connection.”

My heart aches for our beloved denomination right now because I dream of a fully inclusive church. I dream of a deeply Wesleyan and evangelical church that is welcoming of all, is focused on mission and outreach, and offers a place at the table for everyone.

My life was changed in the mid-1990s when Gary and I were serving as co-pastors of First United Methodist Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. One Sunday, a young man greeted me after worship and asked to meet briefly in my office. He said, "I have AIDS, and I want to know if I am welcome to take Communion in this church." We talked a bit more, and Len said, "I am not accepted at my parents' United Methodist Church, but I do not want to give up. I love Jesus and the church. That's why I came here." My views on human sexuality were fairly traditional at that time, yet I looked Len square in the eye and said, "You are always welcome here."

Len's partner never came to church, but I was able to minister to Len over the next year until he died. His greatest joy during that time was being received into membership of the church. I was humbled that Len's partner and friends trusted me enough as a pastor to invite me to officiate at his funeral. My life was forever transformed because of Len's witness to a God of grace and glory.

You see, one of the things that scared Len the most was other people who said directly to him that God did not welcome homosexuals in heaven. Len believed in God, who lovingly created him, and in Jesus who died for him, yet Len desperately needed the affirmation of the church as well. Members of the LGBTQIA community are made in God's image, just as every human being is. They are our family, friends, colleagues, mentors, and fellow church members.

It is still not clear what our denomination will look like in the days and months ahead. As we move into an unknown future as United Methodists, knowing that the risen Christ is with us, I think it is important for you to know of my hopes and dreams for The United Methodist Church and The Iowa Annual Conference.

I yearn for a church that honors diverse theological beliefs, whether Traditional, Centrist, or Progressive. The United Methodist Church has always had a big tent where we do not all think alike, but where we all love alike. And it is precisely our diversity that is our strength. One of my greatest fears is that in our reluctance to honor difference in The UMC, we risk becoming irrelevant in our global world, especially to our young people.

My hope is that each one of us will have a heart of peace as we navigate these difficult times. Here is what I will commit to you.

- I will remain focused on the mission and vision of the Iowa Annual Conference
 - **Mission:** Inspire, equip and connect communities of faith to cultivate world-changing disciples of Jesus Christ.
 - **Vision:** God's hope for the world made real through faithful leaders, fruitful communities, and fire-filled people
- I am committed to creating space for all clergy, laity, and congregations to lead out of the fullness of who they are and out of their own unique pastoral context.
- I continue to be supportive of the foundational concepts of the One Church Plan because it honors a variety of beliefs and practices around human sexuality. At the heart of the One Church Plan is every pastor having the freedom to officiate at same-sex weddings or not; every congregation having the option of hosting same-sex weddings or not; and the ordination of qualified LGBTQIA candidates for ministry who are committed to faithfulness in marriage and celibacy in singleness, just as I would expect the same of heterosexual candidates.
- I am committed to avoiding complaints and trials around human sexuality, if at all possible. If a complaint is filed, however, I will address it with integrity and as much grace as possible, according to *The Book of Discipline*.

And here is what I hope that you, as clergy and laity of the Iowa Annual Conference, will commit to each other.

- I encourage you to continue to create a welcoming atmosphere in your local churches so that all people know that they are invited to be a part of your faith community.
- I ask you to follow the apostle Paul's admonition to the Christians in Ephesus (Ephesians 4:32) "Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ."
- I expect congregations and clergy, as best as you are able, to fully support The United Methodist Church through apportionment giving, which is foundational to mission and ministry in our connectional and global church.

- I urge you to continue to make a difference in your local communities and around the world by modeling Christ's love for all people, creating new ministries that fulfill the needs of your particular context, and going out into your communities to be the hands, feet, voice, and heart of our risen Lord and Savior.
- I urge to continue to love one another, even when you disagree.

God *can* breathe new life into old bones! I am convinced that God is up to something in The United Methodist Church, and I ask that you be creative, proactive, as well as patient as a new future unfolds. My greatest joy as your episcopal leader is the privilege of worshipping and serving with clergy and laity throughout the conference to make disciples of Jesus Christ, regardless of where anyone stands on human sexuality.

My dear friends, in this time of great anxiety, may you not fear, only believe. May you share the good news that the God who raised Jesus from the dead can raise up The United Methodist Church as well! May you celebrate that perfect love casts out all fear. May you live out our core Wesleyan conviction that unity in diversity strengthens our witness to a broken world. And may you continue to fully immerse yourself in making a difference for Jesus in your local communities, in Iowa, and around the world. May God bless you richly in the days ahead.

***God of grace and glory, on thy people pour thy power,
Crown thine ancient church's story; bring her bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour,
For the facing of this hour.***

Blessings,
Bishop Laurie