



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Charlotte Episcopal Area
WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA CONFERENCE

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Dear Colleagues in ministry:

On Tuesday, February 26, the 2019 special session of General Conference for The United Methodist Church concluded its work following a called session by the denomination to address the divisive issue of human sexuality. In 2016, the denomination requested the Council of Bishops to create a Commission on the Way Forward to provide guidance on how The United Methodist Church might find a way to resolve the increasing conflict related to this issue as the church moved into the future.

The General Conference, composed of equal numbers of laity and clergy elected from every annual conference throughout our global church, met in St. Louis, MO, February 23-26, 2019. While the primary focus of the conference was to consider the recommendations of the appointed Commission on the Way Forward, it also considered petitions that were related to these recommendations. The three primary plans identified by the Commission were the Traditional Plan, the Connectional Conference Plan, and the One Church Plan. These plans have been available on our conference website and were studied closely by the Western North Carolina Conference Delegation.

As the Bishop of our conference, I am extremely proud of the dedicated and trustworthy work of our delegates who prepared diligently for this conference and participated fully in the discussion and voting related to the work that was before them. The Western North Carolina delegates were Jennifer Davis, Kim Ingram, Jennifer Lineberry, Amy Coles, Lynne Gilbert, David Christy, Coley Hooker, Ashley Crowder Stanley, Amy Johnson, In-Yong Lee, Shannon Sherfey, James Howell, Sandy Hieronymus, Jeremy Troxler, Hank Dozier, Sam Moore, Robert Upchurch, John Boggs, Tonya Lanier, and Jeff Patterson, along with reserve delegates Sally Queen, Sarah McKinney, and Shelly Webb.

The General Conference dismissed all plans with the exception of the Traditional Plan which retains the denomination's current position on human sexuality and called for greater accountability for pastors, conferences and episcopal leaders to uphold the Book of Discipline. Due to the amendments and additional petitions adopted with the Traditional Plan, the General Conference has asked the Judicial Council to determine if the plan is constitutional. This decision will be reviewed by the Judicial Council April 23-25 2019. Any final decisions will not take effect until January 1, 2020. Nothing changes at this time.

This action has increased the hurt and disappointment of many who had hoped the church would eliminate the language that they have found hurtful and would become more open to welcoming of those who are part of the LGBTQIA community.

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At a time when there is such division and mistrust in the world, some had hoped the church would model what it looks like to move forward with people who don't agree; to create space to accept others different from themselves; and to provide a witness that is badly needed at this time. It is understandable why there is sadness, hurt, and anger over the fact that there are still people who feel that they are not fully welcomed and received in The United Methodist Church.

At the same time, there are others who are pleased with the decisions made at this General Conference. For them, the conference acted in accordance with their interpretation of scripture, born out of a deeply held faith. They are welcoming of the unified moral stance on human sexuality that was reaffirmed in St. Louis and the increased accountability for pastors, churches, and bishops to abide by this position.

Allow me to share some personal impressions: 1.) The discussions and decisions at General Conference were a reminder that we are a global church which brings both the blessing of diversity and the challenge of different contextual understanding of social issues. 2.) Many are being drawn into the intense emotions of this moment and forget that there is a process that our polity provides for checks and balances. The Judicial Council still needs to review and certify the validity of these decisions. 3.) I often remind the church "there is no change until there is a change" and the process allows plenty of space as change of any kind coming out of General Conference does not go into effect until January of the next year (January 1, 2020). 4.) I want to encourage our churches to let the process unfold. 5.) Finally I would encourage a moment of self awareness to determine where our own attitudes and thoughts reside. Do we have a spirit of kindness, compassion, and forgiveness for all?

Waiting to see what unfolds is essential to making wise decisions within the local congregation. Some are not as familiar with our church polity as others. I encourage pastors to educate their congregations about our process as it continues. This Sunday we will return to our local congregations to worship, study, and serve. God has a mission for us to fulfill as we share the good news of Jesus Christ in our communities and the world. At the same time, we acknowledge that others are in grief and are questioning whether they can ever return.

When I was consecrated as a Bishop, I vowed to abide by the Discipline and work for the unity of the church. I will fulfill both promises as I lead us in the Western North Carolina Conference to continue to make disciples of Jesus Christ and encourage the full acceptance of all people into the life and leadership of the church.

With faith, hope, and love,

Paul Leeland

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