

Unity Dialogue of the NC Conference

A Plea For Unity In The United Methodist Church

United Methodists — brothers and sisters in Christ, clergy and laity — we plead with you to “[make] every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3, NRSV) in The United Methodist Church.

Since 1998, we have been two participants in The Unity Dialogue of the North Carolina Conference. For over fifteen years, this dialogue has theologically discussed and debated matters related to the Church and homosexuality. As elders in our denomination, we have profound disagreements about these matters. One of us is committed to maintaining current church teaching and practice. One of us is committed to revising current church teaching and practice. Even so, with others on The Unity Dialogue, we have remained in dialogue, and in communion with The United Methodist Church. We are two members in the Body of Christ, differently gifted by God for different functions, yet both indelibly marked with the same sign of the cross on our brow. We are convinced that “the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you.’” (I Corinthians 12:21) This Body needs all its members.

Yet The United Methodist Church is now threatened by formal schism over matters related to homosexuality. Clergy are presiding at same-sex ceremonies; complaints are being filed; various responses to those complaints (including church trials and the avoidance of church trials) are occurring; and such responses are spreading a spirit of division and distrust. We United Methodists have forced ourselves into what seems to be an untenable, and even irreconcilable, situation because we have seen ourselves not as siblings in the faith but seemingly as quarreling marriage partners, frustrated, incompatible, and betrayed. Presuming this model of dysfunctional or unfaithful marriage has led us to the brink of exhausted options. Increasingly, real pain is experienced by those who are committed to revising the *Book of Discipline* and by those who are committed to defending the *Discipline*. As patience wears thinner by the day, the threat of visible schism grows.

We oppose formal schism in The United Methodist Church. More positively stated, we are committed to the unity of The United Methodist Church. The basis of our primary commitment to unity is Jesus Christ. Into Jesus Christ we, with all members of the Church, were baptized. The same Jesus Christ, before He suffered and died for the sins of the world, prayed for the unity of His Church: “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one....The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one....” (John 17:11,22) Furthermore, we, with all members of our church, have vowed in The Baptismal Covenant to “be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church, and do all in [our] power to strengthen its ministries.” (Vow V)

For the sake of Jesus Christ, St. Paul begged Christians to live out unifying loyalty in the Church. “[L]ead a life worthy of your calling...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 5:1-6) In addition, for the sake of Jesus Christ and in the service of unity, John Wesley urged Methodists to practice discernment: “In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.”

Focusing on Jesus Christ, we remember (literally, re-member); we are renewed in the truth that the Church is the Body of Christ. As the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Church. The Church is Christ’s, not ours. We United Methodists are not powerful owners and decision-making managers of our own church; instead, we are humble servants, called to serve at the bidding of the Lord of the Church. We, mere members of the Body, have neither the authority nor the right to divide what Christ has built in The United Methodist Church.

Therefore, dedicated to the unity of the Church because of Jesus Christ, we believe that the way forward for The United Methodist Church includes meeting the following challenges:

- (1) All United Methodists must “lead a life worthy of the calling,” “[speak] the truth in love,” and “grow up...into Christ.” (Ephesians 4) This mature discipleship most certainly includes: listening in love for the truth God may speak through each other, repenting of our sins, and practicing a penitent spirit.
- (2) All United Methodists must acknowledge and abide by the church order contained in the *Book of Discipline*, which implies:
 - (a) Those United Methodists who defend current church teaching and practice on human sexuality must acknowledge (along with all in the church) that this church teaching and practice will be vigorously tested at General Conferences, and in other venues, in the foreseeable future. For them, “loyal[ty] to Christ through The United Methodist Church” involves proposing and defending, lovingly and persuasively, current church teaching and practice, and if changes are made, abiding by the *Discipline* as debate continues.
 - (b) Those United Methodists who challenge current church teaching and practice on human sexuality must acknowledge and abide by (along with all in the church) the prescribed means through which the *Book of Discipline* is emended and amended. For them, “loyal[ty] to Christ through The United Methodist

Church” involves proposing, lovingly and persuasively, change in current church teaching and practice. When actions of conscientious objection are employed, disciplinary consequences are to be expected and accepted.

We believe that adherence to these challenges demonstrates “loyal[ty] to Jesus Christ through The United Methodist Church.” While such mutual adherence to these challenges will not immediately solve the crisis in our church, it may allow resolution to emerge in God’s time. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote that “justice too long delayed is justice denied” (“Letter from a Birmingham Jail”); and yet, the meaning and requirements of justice emerge only over time — not as quickly as preferred by all.

By the grace of God, with the guidance of God, and under the judgment of God, let us United Methodists meet this test as one church — and remain one church — even as we work through strong disagreements, and discern Christian truth, about human sexuality. Let us not settle for a middle ground of hurried compromise, nor wind up on a divided ground with self-righteous churches. Rather, let us together find the higher ground offered by Jesus Christ, who in The Baptismal Covenant makes us one. Again, the Church is Christ’s, not ours.

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