



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Dakotas-Minnesota Area

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A post-General Conference 2019 message:

I greet you, from St. Louis the morning after the Special General Conference, in the name and spirit of the risen Christ.

Repeatedly, throughout the day of prayer and preparation prior to the official convening of the Special Conference, the delegates, bishops, and guests were invited to speak the refrain: “We are the body of Christ, baptized in his name, redeemed by his blood, and filled with the Holy Spirit. Glory to God. Amen.”

On that day, the refrain rang with joy and anticipation of unity. The refrain cradled the fragile hope of so many for the emergence of a new way of being church—a new creation.

But by the end of the Special Conference, the refrain felt hollow, empty, devoid of life. Not because God failed—God is always faithful and steadfast. But, because we, gathered to represent the global United Methodist Church, failed to be the body of Christ, failed to listen to one another’s hopes and hurts, failed to surrender our political processes and powerful regional preferences to the Spirit of truth and love.

This morning, my heart is heavy, discouraged, and wounded. I know this is true for many of you as well. Others within our theologically and culturally diverse Episcopal Area are likely grateful, perhaps even encouraged, by the results of the Special Session. I understand this. In particular, I lament the harm that has been done and will be experienced by our LGBTQ sisters and brothers. To you I say “you are not the problem.” You are of sacred worth. You are not the problem. Our failure to hear you, or see you, or respect you, or include you is the problem.

Many are asking me specifically what happened at General Conference. It was difficult to follow all the chaotic twists and turns of the legislative process. Over the next couple of days, I will be sorting out and analyzing what the General Conference actually adopted, and the effect of the Conference’s actions on our common life. I will not be doing this in isolation, but with other bishops and other leaders in our two conferences.

What we do know is that several elements of the Traditional Plan were approved. These elements affirm our church’s current policies on homosexuality and strengthen enforcement in



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some areas for clergy who violate these policies. However, everything that was approved has been referred to the Judicial Council for a declaratory decision on its constitutionality. I believe I am correct that no elements of the Traditional Plan, if found constitutional, would become effective until January 1, 2020.

We also know a plan that will permit local churches to disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church was adopted. Again, the constitutionality of this decision is yet to be tested. Often called a “gracious exit plan,” I believe it is anything but gracious. It is not the United Methodist Way to invite or encourage people who are earnestly in love with God and seeking to follow Jesus to find or form another church home because they disagree over one matter of Biblical interpretation or practice of ministry.

I came to this Special Session of General Conference with a dream. As you know, I believed the One Church Plan gives us a glimpse, admittedly an imperfect glimpse, of this dream—of what The United Methodist Church could be. I still hold fast to my dream. It is my rudder, my plumb line, my vocation, the hope of my calling.

I dream of a church that is colorful, diverse, and full of love. I dream of a church that is passionately evangelical and transformative in its mission. I dream of a church that walks humbly with God and loves justice. I dream of a church that honors its contextual differences and ministries, and freely, joyfully provides space for one another’s ministries. I dream of a church that understands and embraces the power of being united through love and mission, rather than rules and regulations. I dream of a church where the radical discipleship and inclusivity of Jesus are never separated and always celebrated.

I encourage all who may be disheartened, harmed, or ready to throw in the towel to remember this truth: The actions of the General Conference do not change who you are, or who we are, in Christ.

We are all created in the image of God and are of sacred worth. We are all beloved by God and welcomed by Jesus at the table of grace. We all stand in need of forgiveness and are called to act with convicted humility. We all share, through our baptism, in Christ’s mission to make disciples of Jesus for the transformation of the world.

I have repeatedly said and written that no matter what happened at this Special General Conference I would get up the next morning and go back to work because the mission of Jesus Christ will not have changed and my calling will compel me to do no less. I encourage all Dakotas and Minnesota United Methodists—clergy and laity—to join me in going back to work. Not to mask over disappointment and injury; not to bury any anger or fear; not to forget the Special Session took place. But because we are in a mission field where real people are experiencing deep pain and despair. Because we are in a mission field where people need



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forgiveness and healing. Because we are in a mission field where people hunger for hope and justice, salvation, and joy. Because we are in a mission field where an amazing diversity of human beings will gather to hear the word proclaimed that God is love and Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

I close with a profound thank you to the Dakotas and Minnesota General Conference delegations and to our respective communication teams. They were an inspiration to me, as were all of you who faithfully held them and me in your prayers during these days.

My prayer, for myself and each of you, is from Paul's letter to the Romans: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection, outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer (Romans 12:9-12, NRSV)."

May it be so! Amen.

Yours in Christ,

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The United Methodist Church