



# The United Methodist Church

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*Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. In so far as it depends on you, live peaceable with each other. Romans 12:5, 18*

As we gather for this special Annual Conference session, I want to take the opportunity to express a few thoughts about where we are as the UMC in light of the Traditional Plan which is to go into affect January 1. To say that many clergy—LGBTQ and straight as well as concerned and allied laity—are very anxious is to understate the situation.

The Traditional Plan imposes severe and very punitive action against clergy who are LGBTQ and/or performing same-gender weddings. I want to say, as I have before, that the Traditional Plan is untenable for many of us and specifically for this Annual Conference. We have incredibly gifted clergy who serve with us who are LGBTQ. In fact, I would like for you to express your love and appreciation for our LGBTQ clergy at this time.

Colleagues who are LGBTQ: we see you, we love you, and our hearts break at the damage that the church is doing in forcing shame, isolation, silence, and fear in your lives right now. How can a church that is based in grace do this in the name of Jesus Christ? As I said, the Traditional Plan is untenable and we cannot live “as usual” into it.

Let me be clear. I will not facilitate or move on toward trial complaints against LGBTQ clergy or clergy who perform same-gender weddings. I joined the UMC years ago because it welcomed and provided space for someone like me to be in ministry. How could I deny a welcome to belong and fully serve Christ and the church to someone else? This is my heart and has been for decades as I have been a pastor in a local church—the first RMN church in East Ohio—a district superintendent and a bishop.

In addition to this being my heart, it’s important to remind you how you have directed me as the bishop of NIC. In June 2019, the Annual Conference voted overwhelmingly, without any or minimal debate, on legislation that the Northern Illinois Conference...

- a. *Will “allow no funds or monies (either directly through payments or indirectly through the time of employees of the Conference) to be expended in legal fees for the purpose of background investigations, complaints, just resolutions, or clergy trials pertaining to LGBTQIA+ ordination and officiating same sex marriages or unions.”*

Let me add, you need to know that refusing funds isn’t a small matter; a church trial costs between \$50,000 and \$100,000. It’s a fiduciary responsibility to avoid trials in addition to conscience.



*b. Directed “Our Bishop in Residence to limit complaints and trials against clergy persons (unless they specifically request such) for the accusations of being a self-avowed practicing homosexual or officiating same sex marriages or unions,” and*

*c. Urged the Resident Bishop to “only pursue trial for clergy that perform same sex weddings or self avowal at the request of the clergy person.”*

These were actions that you took to instruct me as the bishop. But I want to remind you that you also took actions that instruct you as well.

*d. Called upon “the clergy and lay persons of the Northern Illinois Conference to refrain from bringing complaints upon those in our connection for the accusations of being self-avowed practicing homosexual or officiating same sex marriages or unions.”*

*e. In a straw poll, you voted overwhelmingly against the Traditional Plan (84.8%) and with the desire that the church allow for both traditionalists and full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons in ministry.*

You voted to be a fully inclusive church that includes people who don't think or believe like you, but you will live together as one. The heart of this Conference is to give space for persons who are fulfilling their calling and their pastoral ministry (to do weddings) as well as to insure space for those who won't do a wedding.

These are important actions that you took to direct me and you as a Annual Conference as we come to exist under the Traditional Plan. I take them very seriously and will insist that you take them seriously as well.

Furthermore, the NIC has declared itself a Reconciling Conference since 1986 in spite of the fact that it was ruled out of order by the Judicial Council. This has defined who we are as an Annual Conference even as I know not everyone agrees. At the June session, you reaffirmed this commitment to inclusion as a Reconciling Conference.

In addition, the Board of Ordained Ministry (BOOM) has stated since 2016 that they will not ask about a candidate's sexual orientation for commissioning or ordination but will recommend to the clergy session only those candidates which they affirm as fit for ministry. The clergy session has followed suit in terms of approving candidates coming to them from the BOOM. And, to be clear, I will commission and ordain whomever the clergy session approves.

You've heard my heart, and have been reminded of your directions for me and for yourself as an Annual Conference. But at recent meeting of the majority of North Central Jurisdiction (NCJ) delegates to General and Jurisdictional Conference, it was declared among other things “*we call NCJ laity, clergy, Annual Conferences and bishops to covenant to a moratorium on complaints, charges and trials related to officiating same gender wedding and LGBTQIA+ identity and credentialing.*” This statement passed with an 80% support of the delegates from our jurisdiction.

I recognize that not everyone agrees with these decisions on the part of the Annual Conference, the BOOM, the majority of the jurisdictional delegates or me as the bishop. But our history and culture is one of inclusion, not exclusion; grace and not judgment.

Let me remind you what a complaint is meant to do. The word gets thrown around and few know what it really entails. Complaints are meant to address harm. Every Annual Conference in the connection who has brought a clergy person to trial for being LGBTQ or doing a same-gender wedding has lived with the after affects of harm for years to come. One only needs to think about the trial of Rev. Greg Dell in 1999 in this Conference and the hurt, anger and division continues to this day.



This Annual Conference has lived together in its diversity of conviction about LGBTQ persons and same-gender weddings for many years. Therefore, the greater harm to individuals as well as the Annual Conference itself is to bring someone under complaint and potentially to trial. It goes against the spirit and the will of this Annual Conference as evidenced in the legislation you have approved overwhelmingly. The only reason I can see that would motivate someone to now bring complaints against clergy for same-gender weddings and/or being LGBTQIA+ under the Traditional Plan, as it takes affect January 1, 2020, is to be spiteful and mean-spirited; it is to do harm.

Since we don't know what will happen at General Conference 2020 (GC20), we need to allow everyone to get through it in good standing rather than jeopardize our brothers and sisters as we approach yet another critical milestone in what it means to be the church. *"In so far as it depends on you, live peaceable with each other."* (Romans 12:18)

The NIC Exploration Team has shared their draft statement that includes being clear and building consensus about who we are and what our values are as an Annual Conference. This is for the purpose of knowing how to proceed immediately after GC20 if the Traditional Plan is not relaxed or repealed. As an Annual Conference, we may need to affiliate with other Annual Conferences and local churches who also cannot live in The United Methodist Church under the Traditional Plan.

Some of you, some bigger, stronger local churches, are already contemplating disaffiliating with the denomination. I would strongly encourage you to keep this Annual Conference strong. There are smaller, less financially strong local churches who don't want to live under the Traditional Plan, too; they need you and frankly you need them in all the places where we have a UM witness. We are better together than separated or even shattered. Let's work for affiliation with others who want an inclusive church rather than jeopardize the witness of the whole.

Right now in the UMC it feels like there's not a lot we can do to know or determine the future of the denomination. What's important in a time of uncertainty about the future is to do what we can see to do now. What we can do now is to make sure our local churches and our Annual Conference are as strong as possible. This is not a time to hold back—financially or otherwise.

In a time of uncertainty, sometimes it feels like the one thing we have control over is money, using it as leverage or even a stick. We'll vote on a budget today. Whatever you say and however you vote, let your speech and your vote strengthen our Annual Conference. Do no harm; do good.

I know that not all of you agree with who this Annual Conference and I have clearly said we are. But you too included and loved. We are better together even in our differences when we allow those differences to be portals of the gospel, reaching out to different kinds of people who need the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

When you find yourselves as clergy and laity in different positions, go deeper into a conversation with a sister or brother so as to seek to understand as much as you seek to be understood. When one is suffering or weeping from the burden of this disagreement, we weep together; but when one is rejoicing in being who God has created them to be—actually each and everyone of us—we rejoice together.

My heart is where this Annual Conference has repeatedly stated that it is. But more than my heart, it's important that you recognize and support what the heart of this Conference has been from the 1980's at least. The heart of this Conference is what will endure into the future with your next bishop...and that holds a future with hope.

  
Bishop Sally Dyck