



# The United Methodist Church

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Dear Members of the Northern Illinois Annual Conference:

Blessings on your time together with your District Superintendent and leadership of your local church. Church conferences are more and more important as we need to receive information and hold crucial conversations about the life and health of the local church, annual conference and the denomination. Thank you for coming!

You will be focusing on the strategic goals that have been created for our annual conference to be vital and sustainable. In addition the cabinet members and I are asking every church to become more aware and to be in prayer about our beloved United Methodist Church and its struggle with issues of inclusivity, particularly around human sexuality. Therefore, this is a joint statement by the cabinet and me, the bishop, of the Northern Illinois Annual Conference.

As you know, in February 2019 the UMC held a special session of its General Conference (the legislative body of the church) to discuss and decide about how inclusive the church would be toward LGBTQ persons and whether clergy can officiate at same-gender weddings without repercussions. The outcome was what is called the Traditional Plan. This plan creates harsher mandatory penalties for LGBTQ clergy, Boards of Ordained Ministry that approve LGBTQ persons for commissioning and ordination, any clergy that performs a same-gender wedding, and bishops who allow any of these actions within an annual conference.

The result of GC19 has been massive disruption across the church as well as an increasing desire by both conservative/traditionalists and centrist/progressives to stop the harm that this ongoing discussion and battle is creating. I know for myself and the work of our annual conference and its churches/clergy, it is almost all-consuming of time, effort and resources. In the midst of this turbulent time, we must also refocus our efforts on the mission of the church found in the strategic goals our Annual Conference approved in June. At Annual Conference we also were presented with a “straw poll.”

If the Northern Illinois Conference of The United Methodist Church were offered the opportunity to choose a direction for its future, should that direction be: 1) a conference whose policies allow for clergy to officiate at same-gender weddings, allow for consideration of ordained ministry people of varying sexual orientations and gender identities, and in which appointments are made with consideration given to the full range of contextual realities; or 2) according to the Book of Discipline as amended (by what is known as the Traditional Plan) in 2019?



The first option was approved by 84.8% of the clergy and lay delegates. These numbers reflect our identity as a Reconciling conference since 1986. At the same time it may be helpful to know that we are aligned with other conferences. Across the United States, 26 out of 54 annual conferences passed legislation that stated they would not accept the Traditional Plan. Also it's interesting to note that not one annual conference voted to support it.

Across the UMC, there are many conversations, gatherings, and proposed plans—most of them grassroots—to find a “new form of unity,” or separate governance. Many of the ideas create two bodies: 1) those supportive of the conservative/traditional plan and cannot in good conscience be a part of a church that is fully inclusive and 2) those desiring a more centrist/progressive church that is welcoming of all people, including LGBTQ persons and families. Many believe this is the only way to stop fighting and to release our full energies toward our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Our annual conference has an Exploration Team which shared a value statement at the special annual conference session on November 16.

As uncomfortable as it may be, we are in a time of waiting. Petitions to General Conference 2020 won't be fully available until February. This is because it takes some time for all legislation to be translated into the official UMC languages. There are gatherings throughout our annual conference in February to discuss the Exploration Team's statement and also to discuss how it aligns with plans that are proposed to General Conference in May. We would hope that General Conference would relax or repeal the Traditional Plan but we also know that we need to plan for other options if it doesn't. The Exploration team will continue its work to decide how to affiliate with other local churches and annual conferences that like us find the Traditional Plan to be untenable. Please plan to attend one of these gatherings in February.

Some churches have inquired about the disaffiliation legislation that was passed at the General Conference in February. It is still not settled as to its constitutionality but a group in the conference is working on our procedures to prepare for disaffiliation. Even though this is a time of waiting, much is going on in the denomination as well as our annual conference to position us in strength for the future.

I encourage you to be in conversation and prayer in your local church about what is happening in the church. Keep our annual conference strong through deepened relationships and apportionment payments. Also pray for The United Methodist Church in the coming months. Let us demonstrate to the world what it means to be the body of Christ even as we find ourselves in distress.

Blessings on you at your church conference!

Sincerely,

Bishop Sally Dyck and the Northern Illinois Annual Conference Cabinet