Fall 2019

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 exchange 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.

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 that is working to keep abreast of these conversations and plans and also to help us articulate who we are so that when the time comes, we know as an annual conference where we will align. Though their work will not be done, the Exploration Team will report 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 are due September 18, but legislation won’t be available until late November. This is because it takes some time for all legislation to be translated into the official UMC languages. Once it is available, our General Conference delegation and the rest of us can begin to discuss what’s next for us as an annual conference. Early next year, we will have gatherings throughout the conference to further inform, educate, and discuss where we are headed.

Finally, I want to share with you the question that was presented as a “straw poll” to our annual conference session in June 2019:

If the Northern Illinois Conference of The United Methodist Church was 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. Often we are seen as a liberal conference, so 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.

What do you need from us as the Cabinet and Bishop in order to have conversations about this in your church and district?

Please be in conversation and prayer for your local church, the Northern Illinois Annual Conference, and our denomination in the months ahead as we continue to find our way forward. Blessings on you at your church conference!

Sincerely,

Bishop Sally Dyck and the Northern Illinois Annual Conference Cabinet