

Pastoral Letter from Bishop Easterling Following General Conference 2019

Posted by [Bishop LaTrelle Miller Easterling](#) on Mar 11, 2019

But now, says the Lord—the one who created you, Jacob, the one who formed you, Israel: Don't fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when through the rivers, they won't sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you won't be scorched and flame won't burn you. I am the Lord your God, the holy one of Israel, your savior. But now, says the Lord—the one who created you, Jacob, the one who formed you, Israel: Don't fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when through the rivers, they won't sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you won't be scorched and flame won't burn you. I am the Lord your God, the holy one of Israel, your savior. Isaiah 43: 1-3a (CEB)

Beloved,

The turbulent waters of marginalization have swelled and the scorching fire of rejection laps at the heels of the gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender and queer members, friends, and allies within The United Methodist Church. The days after the Special Session of General Conference have felt parched and dry and painful. On Tuesday, February 26, the delegates of the Special Session voted 438-384 to pass The Traditional Plan. By a 54-vote margin, a slim majority of the gathered voting body again concretized a second-class citizenship within The United Methodist Church.

Since 1972, our beloved denomination has inserted these words into our Book of Discipline: "homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." With those six words, we have laid on the altar of polity an entire group of persons and told them that their lives are unholy and damned. There is simply no other way to interpret it. I unequivocally disagree with that belief. Persons who are gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender and queer are created in the image and likeness of God, as are all others. They do not choose to be who they are; they are living as they were created to be. They do not choose a gay lifestyle; rather, they are living as God created them.

In the aftermath of the Special Session, I and countless others have spent time talking people out of taking their lives, offering pastoral care to pastors and laity who have given serious consideration to walking away from the denomination and some from their faith. We have cried with them, prayed with them, and attempted to remind them that the General Conference is the law-making body of our denomination, but it is not the church. Quite often law and God's grace find themselves at odds.

The hope of the Special Session was that we would create a way forward with enough contextual space for all persons to live into our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Correspondingly, many hoped it would offer the opportunity for members of the LGBTQIA+ community to be equal members within our church without fear of consequences. The resounding justification offered by those who would not support the One Church Plan is that they could not be affiliated with a denomination that condones what they believe to be sin. As I have repeatedly said, well-regarded biblical scholars and theologians disagree on the interpretation of the scriptures used to support that understanding. The One Church Plan respected those differences and gave room for all to live into their beliefs with integrity. To say that you cannot remain in relationship with "sinners" is to deny the reality that our denomination, as is the case with any denomination, is filled with persons living in ways some would define as sin. Our current disciplinary language simply elevates one perceived sin above all others and castigates some to the exclusion of others.

We have traversed this road before. Our church law and God's grace have been divergent on many occasions. The Methodist Church divided over whether it was sinful to purchase and own other human beings in the practice of chattel slavery. The Methodist Church at one time required its ministers to sign an oath of abstinence from tobacco use. We argued over divorce and whether those who had been could serve as clergy. Our denomination wrestled with the inclusion of women in the ordained ministry. In each of those debates, Scripture was used to justify exclusion. Our Book of Discipline concretized those justifications. And, we have come to understand that those positions were wrong. I believe we are wrong once again.

In the great hymn of the church, *In Christ There Is No East or West*, we find these words:

*In Christ, there is no east or west,
in him no south or north,
but one great fellowship of
love throughout the whole wide earth.*

I believe those words, supported by the Great Commandment to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself," are the heart and soul of the Gospel. That love is unconditional. It includes all.

I agree with many who have articulated that this is a time of crisis within The United Methodist Church. This is also an opportunity for the Baltimore-Washington Conference to rise above exclusionary practices to say unequivocally that we will recognize the dignity and sacred worth of all.

Take heart, beloved, and do not place a period where God places a comma. God is not done with us yet!

Blessings and peace,
Bishop LaTrelle Miller Easterling