

## [Now on Sexuality in the AME Church](#)

Rev. Jennifer S. Leath, Ph.D., Guest Editor

This past Friday, the Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church (UMC) found that those who consecrated Bishop Karen Oliveto (the first “out,” married lesbian woman elected and consecrated bishop in the UMC) violated their “commitment to abide by and uphold the church’s definition of marriage and stance on homosexuality.” Awaiting the decision of the Judicial Council, Bishop Karen Oliveto preached in Chapel at Iliff School of Theology this past Wednesday. After this service, I asked Bishop Oliveto, what would you want to say to the AME Church. She said the following:

*“The one thing I would want the AME Church family, my family, to know is we have so much to learn from you and I pray that your voices will mingle with my voice – will mingle with all our voices – so that the Methodist family can be as strong as possible as we push back hate, and injustice, and oppression in the world in Jesus’s name.”*

Though we pretend otherwise, it is clear that there is **not** agreement within the AME Church when it comes to matters of sexual orientation and gender identity. In fact, our positions on this matter are so disparate that we could not agree on a way to include gender and sexual justice for our Quadrennial focus on social justice – *knowing* that people daily suffering hatred, injustice, and oppression on account of sexual orientation and gender identity all over the world! Given this truth, it behooves us to mind the miner’s canary in the UMC – and get on the right side of these issues. Bishop Oliveto’s case clarifies at least three important points of which the AME Church should be mindful:

**We who understand our sexual orientation and gender identity to be *both sacred and outside of heterosexual, cisgender categorization will neither hide and lie nor leave and disappear.*** We wish to live with integrity before the G\*d who made and loves us – and the people whom G\*d has called us to love and serve. The church has abused and taken advantage of the silences, dissemblances, and dishonesties of LGBTQ people (and especially clergy) who live in fear. Such fear will not rule the “now” generation. **Integrity is right.**

**We, as a Church, cannot avoid the work of careful and *fair* discernment with respect to matters of sexual orientation and gender identity.** This requires consistent interpretive methods – and interpretations – when it comes to scripture. This requires carefully reasoning, including engagement with the science and biological research that affirms sexual and gender diversities. This requires the nurturing of our *true* countermemories that acknowledge that sexual and gender variance has been a part of *us* and traditions of *our* communities of African descent *forever*. This requires our refusal to dismiss the experiences of sexual and gender variance in our midst – and the voices of those who live out such variance. **Discernment is right.**

**Our polity must catch up with our problems.** A major stumbling block for the UMC as well as the AME Church is that our systems of governance are oblivious to the seriousness of the discourse on sexual orientation and gender identity for the church internally *and* externally. Our legislation and position papers on sexual orientation and gender identity are dated, inconsistent, incomplete,

prejudiced, contradictory, and unholy. Delegates see this at the General Conference. Members see this in local churches. Society sees this as they peer through our stained glass windows. Thus, we hemorrhage members – and where we have cauterized to stop the flow, no new people will enter. Our regional diversities and hierarchical power games are unsatisfactory excuses for our failure to reform. **Updated polity is right.**

*Now* is a time we could make a different choice as the AME Church. We could stand with Bishop Oliveto and “push back hate, and injustice, and oppression in the world in Jesus’s name.” *Now* we could be free, knowing: where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.

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