



April 27, 2019

Sisters and Brothers,

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Risen Lord. As I have shared during my episcopal visits following the special-called General Conference 2019, two critical matters approved at this General Conference had been referred to the Judicial Council for declaratory rulings: Whether the approved Traditional Plan was constitutional and whether a disaffiliation petition (90066) also approved, was constitutional, according to the Constitution of The United Methodist Church. The Judicial Council has been meeting this week and this morning released its decisions.

The Judicial Council determined that parts of the Traditional Plan were constitutional, but as in previous determinations of the Judicial Council, much of the enforcement sections of the Traditional Plan as approved by the General Conference 2019 were again determined to be unconstitutional (Judicial Council Decision 1378). On the disaffiliation Petition 90066 that provides an exit plan for local churches to leave the denomination, the Judicial Council ruled that it is in line with the Constitution of The UMC while also clarifying that the annual conference must approve the disaffiliation of a local church (Judicial Council ruling 1379).

In the preliminary work of analysis done by our Council of Bishops with legal counsel the following important rulings were highlighted:

1. The question of local churches exiting from the denomination is one that is determined by votes in the local church and at the annual conference. This retains the value of our connection.
2. The practice of certifying Board of Ordained Ministry members on whether they would follow the Book of Discipline in its entirety, including on matters of human sexuality/LGBTQ identity, was found unconstitutional. Current language around sexuality and restrictions on same-sex weddings and ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals was not in question and is retained.
3. Accountability for bishops continues to be lodged in the jurisdictional college or central conference.
4. Exiting churches must pay their fair share of pension liability. Exiting clergy retain their pension but it is converted to limit further liability to the conference.
5. Seven petitions in the Traditional Plan were found to be unconstitutional, consistent with two previous Judicial Council decisions, and eight petitions were found to be constitutional.

There is no surprise in what the Judicial Council has determined. It is clear that the Judicial Council worked hard to provide the declaratory rulings requested of them. They are the interpreters of the law not the makers of the law. The General Conference makes the law. And, for too long the General Conference has chosen to act like the pharisees who were committed to the legalism of their own creation rather than the laws of grace, mercy, and love for all God's children that Jesus came proclaiming. The preservation of those pharisees' self-righteousness was more important to them than the vulnerability required by the commandments to love God and to love neighbor as we love ourselves, and it so appears to be the case with our General Conference as well.

There are those among us who are saying that the Judicial Council decisions now free us to move ahead. The decisions have been made, accept it and move on they say. These friends tend to be the same persons who unequivocally state that The United Methodist Church has been in decline for generations because of the debate over the full inclusion or the exclusion of our LGBTQ children and siblings. That we have been in decline is true, but it is not as simple as some would assume. Conservatives have left because they don't want to be part of a church where they have to deal with gay persons. Gay persons have also left because who would want to be part of a church where you are told in so many ways that you are unacceptable, less-than, incompatible with the very Word of God that they have placed their faith in! Many of their family members have left with them. Somehow, we forget to count them in the numbers of those who have departed, pushed out of the church. Post General Conference 2019 there are now those who consider themselves centrists who are also leaving. They are leaving because they are tired of a church that has made who one loves the litmus test of faithfulness.

Can we not see it? Our decline is not because of the long struggle over the matter of human sexuality. I believe it is because of the lack of commitment to the greatest commandments to love God and to love our neighbor. How can love for God be true when we reject those whom God has also created and called good? And how can love for neighbor be authentic when we say to our LGBTQ children and siblings that they are not worthy of the fullness of love just as God has created them? The exclusion of LGBTQ persons is but one broken place in the life of our church, but it reveals to the core of our life together our lack of love for God and neighbor. Truly loving God and authentically loving neighbor is what will reverse our decline and allow us to grow into the faithful and fruitful church that God calls us to be.

I keep praying that we will not be torn asunder by the pettiness of what seems to be our present inwardly focused missional direction that sounds like this: Let's exclude all LGBTQ persons and their supporters unless they conform to our punitive laws. Let's judge the righteousness of our LGBTQ children and siblings based solely on their sexual orientation or gender identity. Let's not hear the witness of their faith in Christ because it would make things much too complicated for us. Let's make God's love small and limited to only some, and certainly not to LGBTQ persons, so that we can control it. What happened to being the people called United Methodist who dared to make Matthew 28:19-20 its mission and the transformation of the world its bold vision?

I believe that the full inclusion of ALL God's children is the necessary first step to being the Church God calls us to be.

Your Sister in Christ,

Bishop Minerva G. Carcaño