



# North Church and the LGBTQ Believer



## INTRODUCTION

This pamphlet examines the biblical and theological rationale for our practice of radical hospitality of LGBTQ persons. It explains the congregation's decision to become a member of the Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN), and it explores the practical implications for how we live out our witness for God's inclusive love. Our witness for inclusivity and equality is much broader than the issue of homosexuality however, and given the current controversy surrounding this issue within American religious life it is necessary to provide a more comprehensive explanation.

A note about terminology: As our culture has been going through rapid changes in its understanding of gender and sexuality, so too has our language. Human sexuality is far too complex to be reduced to simple categories of gay and straight. I am using "LGBTQ" and "queer" interchangeably and the latter as a positive reference. Both words are used to convey a broad spectrum that encompasses lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, questioning, queer, two-spirit, intersex, asexual, aromantic, agender, non-binary, genderqueer, and pansexual. Even though many include straight allies when referring to queer, for the purposes of this pamphlet I am referring to all non-queer persons as straight.

All scripture quotes, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible and are copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA.

I have designed this booklet to give clarity to persons who are considering membership at North, and so it attempts to offer a comprehensive answer to a variety of questions. You may want to read the entire booklet or you may only need to read the sections that are relevant to you. Major portions of the book originally appeared in a sermon in 2012 and in a presentation to the Affirming Group Sunday school class.

It is my prayer that this pamphlet will help you grow in your faith in Jesus Christ as you explore this issue.

Rev. Darren Cushman Wood, Senior Pastor

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## THE NORTH CHURCH RESOLUTION

September 2011 the Board of Directors of North adopted the following resolution:

“North UMC is an open, inclusive, and welcoming church. We affirm that through God’s redeeming love, all are one in Christ. YOU are welcome at North.

- North United Methodist Church is an inclusive and reconciling community. We welcome all regardless of race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, domestic or marital status, physical or mental ability, economic status, political affiliation, faith history, education and all other ways in which we are human.
- We believe that all have received God’s love and grace. We seek to transform our church and world into the full expression of Christ’s inclusive love. We celebrate the diversity of North Church.
- We respect the inherent worth and valuable contributions that each member makes to the Body of Christ.
- As we journey toward reconciliation, we proclaim this statement of welcome to all who have known the pain of exclusion and discrimination within the church. We welcome all persons to full participation in the life and ministries of North United Methodist Church.”

The resolution was “Based on [our] deep and rich history of hospitality and welcome, prayerful consideration of Holy Scripture, reflection upon our Wesleyan heritage, the faithful witness of numerous persons within our congregation.... and our belief that God intends that the world shall be transformed into the full expression of Christ’s inclusive love.” The resolution concluded: “The people of North United Methodist Church declare their conviction that all persons, including those persons who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or questioning, are children of God and as such are entitled to full and equal status and participation within the United Methodist Church.”

Along with this general affirmation of inclusion, the board also took steps to implement this policy by joining the Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN). RMN is a caucus of United Methodist congregations that, according to its mission statement, “mobilizes United Methodists of all sexual orientations and gender identities to transform our church and world into the full expression of Christ’s inclusive love.” Its vision statement is:

“Reconciling Ministries Network envisions a renewed and vibrant Wesleyan movement that is biblically and theologically centered. As committed disciples of Jesus Christ, the Reconciling Ministries Network strives to transform the world by living out the Gospel’s teachings of grace, love, justice and inclusion for all of God’s children.”

The unanimous decision came after a lengthy process of discernment. In the months leading up to the vote, the entire congregation was invited to give feedback through more than 16 small group conversations as well as a congregation-wide informational luncheon that drew nearly 200 people.

While North's tradition of inclusivity of LGBTQ persons began decades earlier, this public witness was something new for the congregation and its relationship with the denomination. The resolution puts us at odds with the official teachings of our denomination, which states: "The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching."<sup>1</sup> We disagree. Our stance is grounded in scripture, shaped by our tradition, and informed by our experience of the Holy Spirit. The resolution has guided the congregation's advocacy for change in the denomination and society.

## WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS—AND DOES NOT SAY

Defenders of the current stance cite scripture to support their position. Passages such as Leviticus 18:22, Romans 1:26-7, and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah are often quoted to prove that biblical authority is clear on this issue. On closer inspection, however, what the Bible says is very limited.

Every translation is an interpretation of the original words. The word "homosexual" never appears in scripture because it is terminology of modern psychology. The ancient writers of the Bible would not have understood sexuality as an orientation but only as a behavior. Also, same-gender sexual activity is a very minor issue in the Bible. There are only six passages that refer directly to the issue and each one can be interpreted in ways that do not support a blank condemnation of homosexuality:

- **Genesis 2:24**—Genesis 1 and 2 describe the origins of many things, including marriage. Even though monogamous heterosexual marriage is affirmed in this passage, it is not an exclusive norm, especially given the diversity of other marital and non-marital relations that are tolerated in the Bible, such as King Solomon's polygamy. Often the case is made for heterosexuality because of procreation. But when this argument is pushed to its logical conclusion, this implies that sex is only for procreation and that singleness and celibacy are substandard lifestyles.
- **Genesis 19:1-29**—The main offense in the story of Sodom is gang rape, not homosexuality in general. The mistreatment of foreigners violated the principle of hospitality, which is a major theme in scripture. Ezekiel elaborated on this without referencing homosexual acts when he defined the sins of Sodom as "pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy" (19:49).
- **Leviticus 18:22; 20:13**—The holiness code of Leviticus reflects an ancient worldview that categorized creatures as "clean" and "unclean" with rituals and moral regulations based on this worldview. Both chapters offer a list of prohibited sexual relations reflecting this worldview and designed to preserve social order in an ancient context. Both chapters condemn only male sexual relations and say nothing about lesbian relations. Chapter 20 calls for the death penalty.

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<sup>1</sup> 2016 *Book of Discipline*, ¶ 161 G.

The code was also designed to preserve the unique identity of Israel in contrast to other nations. For example, in the list of prohibited sexual relations there is a reference to the worship of the god Molech (18:2-3, 21, 24; 20:1-5, 23). The prohibitions in 18:22 and 20:13 were made in this context. The cultural context of Leviticus was vastly different from today and thus cannot be applied directly to our contemporary context. For this reason, we are inconsistent in how we apply them to today. We do not follow the prohibition of husbands having sex with their menstruating wives even though this is condemned in Leviticus 18:19. In the same way, we can set aside 18:22 and 20:13.

- **I Corinthians 6:9-10**—Misinterpretations abound in the New International Version when it uses the word “homosexuals.” The Greek phrase is *malakoi arsenokoitai*, which other translations render “sexual perverts,” “male prostitutes,” and “sodomites.” The literal meaning of *malakoi* is “soft” or “effeminate.” It can be used pejoratively in the context of pederastic activity to refer to “call-boys,” young males who cultivated an effeminate appearance and engaged in sexual activity as the passive partner with older males. The meaning of *arsenokoitai* is difficult to establish because this is probably the earliest existing use in print and it is made up of two other words: *arsen*=male, and *koite*=bed. There are two things to keep in mind: 1) often in Greek compound words, the second of the two words denotes the action and the first denotes the object, “in bed with, lying with a male.” The question is “Who lies with the male?” The Greek word can be masculine or feminine, as in women who sleep around with men or men who sleep around with men. The context of this passage would suggest men who sleep with younger male prostitutes. Both the male prostitutes as well as the Johns who sleep with them are being condemned. There is no condemnation of sexual relations between two consenting adults nor does the writer have any awareness that homosexuality can be expressed in a relationship of loving commitment.
- **I Timothy 1:9-10**—As with 1 Corinthians, many translations abound. There are two words at play, *pronois* and *andrapodistais*: “fornicators,” “sodomites,” “slave traders,” “adulterers,” “perverts,” “unchaste,” and “kidnappers.” *Pornois* (as in pornography) refers to all types of sexual immorality. *Andrapodistais* is a slave dealer or kidnapper. What is being condemned is sex trafficking. Again, there is no reference to sexual relations between two consenting adults within a covenantal relationship of mutual love.
- **Romans 1:26-27**—Romans appears to offer the strongest argument against homosexuality. When combined with Genesis 2:24, it makes the case against homosexuality based on the order of creation. On closer examination, however, its scope is limited and culturally conditioned just like 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. In chapter one, Paul states that God’s existence and moral standards are revealed through the created order. Idolatry is the rejection of this natural revelation. Verses 24-32 spell out the ethical consequences of idolatry. Paul’s argument is that all people need the grace of Jesus Christ for salvation. This includes Gentiles, but how can they be held accountable for their behavior if they do not have access to the law that God had only given to the Jews? Thus Paul must establish that Gentiles could have known God’s standards through natural revelation, which they violated. In Greek, “degrading passions” in verse 26 (NIV “shameful lusts”) is *atimia* (dishonorable) *pathos* (anything that befalls one; misfortune;

accident). This “dishonorable misfortune” is the inevitable consequences of idolatry that dishonors the Creator and sets one on a trajectory of self-destructive passion (verse 27, *orexis*=appetite). Romans 1, like Leviticus, reflects a culturally conditioned worldview. Specifically, it condemns idolatry and sexual practices which reflected an idolatrous worldview. It does not refer to same-gender sexual relationships within the context of consenting adults and mutual love. At best it is a warning against same-gender promiscuity, which puts it on par with Paul’s warnings in other letters.

- **Matthew 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12**—Jesus said nothing about homosexuality but this story about his view of divorce and marriage has been used to bolster condemnation of same-sex relationships. In response to the Pharisees questioning his interpretation of the Mosaic law, Jesus quotes Genesis in defense of his hard line on divorce (Matthew 19:5-6; Mark 10:6-8). Traditionalists combine this with Romans 1 to reject all forms of non-straight romantic and sexual relationships. The logic of their argument leads to the assumption that the purpose of marriage is procreation. This implies that infertile couples and celibate individuals are in a lesser status. It dishonors straight marriages in which there are no sexual relations. Even though Genesis describes other-sex marriage as a norm, it does not preclude God blessing other forms of relationships. (God seemed to have no problems with Solomon’s polygamy.) Marriage is a calling and a vocation, and as such the purpose of a marriage covenant is to aid those who are called to it to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. God calls LGBTQ believers into same-sex marriages for the purpose of aiding them in living out their faith just as God calls straight believers into marriages.

The sparse references to “homosexuality” in the Bible are culturally conditioned, and they presuppose that the only expressions of same-sex erotic behavior are to be found in relationships of exploitation and promiscuity. All forms of exploitation and promiscuity—homosexual, heterosexual and everything in between—are sinful because they destroy the image of God. However, the Bible says nothing about same-sex relations within the context of a covenant relationship between two mutually consenting adults because this was not conceivable given the worldview of its writers. Thus the Bible cannot be used to make blanket condemnations of LGBTQ persons.

## **HOW TO INTERPRET THE BIBLE FOR TODAY**

If we cannot apply the Bible literally or directly to today, then what are we to do with scripture? Someone once told me, “I do not take the Bible literally; I take it seriously.” The only way that we can take the Bible seriously and discover its importance for us is to abandon the overly simplistic approach of literalism. This does not mean that we are abandoning the authority of scripture but rather we are discovering its real purpose in helping us become more faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

A literalist interpretation of scripture is fraught with problems. It is always inconsistent and full of contradictions. Even the most conservative Christian does not take every part of the Bible literally. A fundamentalist will quote chapter and verse to condemn homosexuality but conveniently ignore other

biblical teachings, such as the commands to do justice for the poor. No fundamentalist would recommend giving a beer to someone who is in trouble, but that is exactly what Proverbs 31:6-7 says (in the New International Version).

Throughout history literalism has been used to perpetuate injustice. Slaveholders in the 19th century claimed moral justification for slavery based on a literalist interpretation of the Bible. Women have been subject to domestic violence because key scripture passages have been used to shame them into staying in abusive relationships.

Traditional United Methodists affirm the ordination of women and are tolerant of divorce. They are committed to human rights and condemn domestic violence. They accept scientific insights on a host of other topics and believe that this knowledge is compatible with scripture. Most abolitionists and early feminists were devout evangelical Christians, but they were not literalist in their application of biblical teachings on women and slavery. Today evangelicals are willing to be flexible on those issues of interpretation, but when it comes to the issue of homosexuality they are not. There is an inconsistency in the way they interpret scripture.

Just because one does not take it literally does not mean they are unfaithful. All recognize that some ethical teachings in scripture are so culturally conditioned that they should not be applied directly to today. All Christians, whether implicitly or explicitly, make judgments about which biblical teachings can have only an indirect significance for our times.

Indeed, it is only when we move beyond literalism that we understand the true nature and function of scripture for our discipleship. This is hard for many of us to comprehend because of the overwhelming influence the Religious Right has in this country. This group has given people the false impression that there is only one way to faithfully interpret scripture. Regardless, you can be a “true believer” and not agree with the Religious Right’s interpretations of the Bible.

The purpose of the Bible is to be a channel for deepening our relationship with Jesus Christ. United Methodists believe that the study of scripture is a means of grace. The Bible does this by being a reliable witness of God’s work in the world, which culminated with Jesus Christ and continues through the presence of the Holy Spirit today. In other words, the Bible is a relational book whose purpose is to connect us with God. Our faith is not in scripture but in God, and scripture is a means to that end.

The authority of the Bible resides in how the Holy Spirit uses scripture to form our faith. 1 Timothy 3:16 says that “all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” Fundamentalists point to this verse as a description of the origins of the Bible. However, they overlook the real significance of inspiration to guide our interpretations.

“Inspired” means “God breathed.” All scripture is God breathed. Throughout the Bible the breath of God is the life-giving force of the Holy Spirit. God breathed life into the first human, breathed new life into Israel’s dry bones, and gives us new life (Genesis 2:6; Ezekiel 37; John 3).

To say that scripture is “inspired” or “God breathed” means that the purpose of scripture is to give us life. It is a channel of the Spirit to breathe life into our faith. This is what makes scripture useful for all who belong to God. Therefore, an accurate interpretation of scripture must affirm life.

Any interpretation of scripture that justifies violence and discrimination is a false interpretation—no matter how “literal” it may be. Such interpretations suffocate the lives of queer folks. When scripture is used to justify the exclusion and discrimination of LGBTQ persons then it is a misuse of scripture because it does not allow the Holy Spirit to breathe life into us.

United Methodists believe that scripture is the primary authority for our faith. However, our interpretation of scripture is informed by scientific research because we do not believe that scripture was meant to be a science textbook. Our interpretation of scripture is guided by tradition, which means that we listen to the teachings of the church throughout the centuries because we can learn from their wisdom. And our interpretation of scripture is enriched by our experiences because we believe that the Holy Spirit is active and speaking to us. Reason, tradition and experience enable our interpretation of scripture to become an effective means by which the Holy Spirit breathes life into our faith.

Not every verse or story in the Bible has to be applied directly to today in order to be an effective means of grace. Some passages are timeless and direct in their application, such as the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12). But other passages are so culturally specific that they cannot and should not apply to today, such as the above-mentioned verses related to homosexuality. Yet, this does not mean that the Bible gives no guidance for the acceptance of homosexuality. There are other biblical principles and paradigms that support the inclusion of LGBTQ persons.

The biblical principle of love clearly supports our practice of radical hospitality. The common thread that runs throughout the Bible is God’s saving love of humanity. Other minor themes in the Bible, like homosexuality, are secondary to the theme of grace and must be interpreted in light of this core message. For example, the Old Testament is interpreted in light of the New Testament and all passages are interpreted in light of the words and actions of Jesus because He is the embodiment of God’s love. Just as Jesus accepted the outcast and the rejected, the church is called to welcome those who have been rejected by their families and treated like second-class citizens by society.

The biblical principle that all persons are created in the image of God is also a basis for our practice of acceptance. Research has shown that our gender identity and sexual orientation have complex origins and development and are not simply a matter of choice. From a theological perspective we would say that is the way God made us. If we are created in the image of God, then that which we have no control over is a part of God’s good creation. This includes our sexuality when expressed in relationships of covenantal love that is modeled for us by Jesus Christ in his relationships.

## **THE ACTS 10 PARADIGM**



The most compelling paradigm is the story of the early church's inclusion of Gentiles. This story models how the church today should embrace LGBTQ believers. Acts 10-15 describes the early church's struggle over the question of requirements for Gentile converts. Should Gentiles be required to observe Jewish law in order to receive salvation from the Jewish Messiah? The crux of this question was the requirement of circumcision.

The apostle Peter had a strange dream in Acts 10 in which he saw a blanket full of animals that the Law of Moses had deemed ritually unclean for human consumption. He heard God tell him, "Kill and eat." His vision from God was contradicting the law of God. When he woke up servants of a Roman (Gentile) Centurion named Cornelius informed him that an angel had told Cornelius to contact him. For a faithful Jew such interactions were forbidden because they would make one unclean.

However, Peter went and preached to Cornelius's people. He saw their faith and said, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality." Then "the Holy Spirit fell upon" his Gentile listeners and they began speaking in tongues just as the Jewish Christians had done at Pentecost (Acts 2). He baptized Cornelius's people in the name of Jesus Christ as a sign of their full inclusion into the church.

From that moment on the church would never be the same. Before this encounter, the church was a sect within Judaism. It was assumed that in order for someone to be saved by Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, they would have to become Jewish by being circumcised. After this encounter with Cornelius's people, the church held a council in Jerusalem and lifted the requirement of circumcision. No longer would a person have to become Jewish in order to become a Christian. Gentiles were included as equal members in the church because God had equally given them the Holy Spirit (Acts 15).

I believe that what God did in the first century with the Gentiles is what God is now doing with my queer kin. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality" is a timeless truth that applies to the contemporary issue of homosexuality facing the church. Just as Peter offered baptism to those first Gentile believers, I believe that full inclusion—from membership to ordination and all the rites of the church—should be offered to those who are not straight. Acts 10 is the paradigm, an authoritative example, that supports full inclusion.

A thoughtful reading of scripture reveals that the Bible is limited in what it says directly about LGBTQ issues. It condemns idolatrous and exploitative sexual activity. It says nothing about committed relationships of mutual love between persons of the same gender. The acceptance of our queer kin in Christ is based on the major biblical themes of grace and the image of God, and we find support for the full inclusion of LGBTQ believers in the example of the early church's acceptance of Gentile believers. It is not a sin to be a homosexual, bisexual, transgender or questioning. Like heterosexuality, it only becomes sinful when it is practiced outside of a relationship of love and respect. The biblical principles of love and justice and peace that Jesus taught should govern all our relationships.

## THE GRACE OF GOD AND THE LGBTQ BELIEVER

God's love in Jesus Christ saves us from sin. And yet, this simple truth has been used to hurt queer individuals. They have been told that Jesus can save them from being gay and make them straight. The net effect is not life and peace but anxiety and shame.

But being queer is not a sin. Same-sex romantic and erotic relationships are not sinful. And so, we need a new understanding of salvation. The core beliefs of Methodism provide a helpful solution.

We Methodists believe that all persons are created in the image of God. Sin, then, is anything that violates or distorts the divine image. Salvation is a restoration or renewing of God's image in us.

LGBTQ persons are created in God's image and God's image includes their sexuality and gender identity. The diversity of our genders and sexual orientations is part of the wideness of creation that is nurtured in the life of the Triune God. The nuances and mysteries of humanity are a part of the goodness of creation.

In the case of our sexuality and gender, all of us—queer and straight—live in a sinful context of repression and exploitation. On the social level, sin is manifested in and perpetuated by complex cultural and legal systems. For queer folks this sinful context ranges from social stereotypes to legal discrimination to physical assault. On the personal level, we react to this sinful context in ways that further destroy God's image in others and ourselves. This often takes the form of self-hatred, self-destructive behavior, and relationships that are harmful to oneself and others.

Salvation is a restoration of the image of God. Christ Jesus, who is the pure image and likeness of God, became human to renew every dimension of our humanity. Salvation is God's life-long process of reconciliation, recovery and renewal that culminates in the gift of eternal life. The Spirit of Christ in our hearts is what animates this process.

Salvation is not an escape from being human but rather our fulfillment as human beings. For queer and straight believers alike, salvation is not a denial or escape from how God made us, but rather the fulfillment and the wholeness which comes from finding our life in the Spirit of Christ.

At the heart of John and Charles Wesley's teaching is their "order of salvation" that describes the dynamic process of the grace of Jesus Christ working to renew the image of God. We move through stages in our faith, each stage being shaped in a different way by grace.

In the first stage our faith is unformed. We are not fully aware of our need for God and may not even believe that God exists. Regardless of our perceptions, God has a relationship with us. God chooses us before we choose God. God loves us before we are aware of it. God gives us a sense of right and wrong (a conscience) and cultivates a desire to find our fulfillment in God. The Holy Spirit prevents the full effects of sin and evil from destroying us. This is the **prevenient grace** of God. "Prevenient" means "to go before," referring to our experience of grace before we put our trust in Christ (you can also call it "preparing" grace). Everyone experiences prevenient grace because the Spirit of Christ is actively working in all persons.

If homosexuality is not a sin but is part and parcel of being created in God's image, then the LGBTQ person experiences prevenient grace through those persons and experiences that affirm them in the face of discrimination and exclusion. It is the Spirit keeping alive one's desire for God in spite of the condemnation received from other Christians. Through its practice of radical hospitality, the church seeks to be an agent of God's prevenient grace to all people.

The second stage is when a person becomes aware of prevenient grace and accepts God's love. During this phase we experience **justifying grace**. Justifying grace (also called "justification") is God's forgiveness and acceptance of us. As the old hymn says, "Just as I am, without one plea," God forgives us for all our sins and frees us from the power of sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is nothing we must do to earn this; there is no work we can perform to deserve this gift.

Our response is to accept God's forgiving and affirming embrace. This acceptance demands a change of attitude and behavior that we call repentance. We renounce our participation in sin to affirm our obedience to Christ. Queer folks do not repent of their gender or sexuality for those dimensions of their lives are embraced and renewed, not rejected by God.

Justifying grace invites the LGBTQ believer to accept one's self as created and loved by God and to leave behind self-hatred. With justifying grace God often gives us the assurance of salvation, which is the inner peace of the Spirit confirming that God embraces us. The Spirit enables us to be at peace with the mysteries and nuances of our sexuality and gender identity because we know that our ultimate identity is in Jesus Christ.

Like all believers, the LGBTQ person must also repent. But it is not a repentance of one's sexual orientation. Rather, one must leave behind all self-destructive behavior and unloving relationships. This includes sexual relationships that are not grounded in mutual love and respect. On this note, there is no difference between queer and straight believers.

Repentance opens us up to the third stage, which is **sanctifying grace** (also called "sanctification" or "holiness"). For the rest of our lives we continue to grow in faith through the ongoing direction and empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

The initial experience of sanctifying grace is sometimes called a "new birth," because the Spirit working within us gives us new life. We are not "born again" into a different gender or sexual orientation. Rather, the Spirit affirms and fulfills how God made us to be. We are no longer identified by

those things that tried to destroy God's image in us. We are the children of God because Christ lives in us.

Sanctification is a life-long maturing process in which our actions and attitudes are reshaped to reflect our life and identity in Christ. Little by little our actions and attitudes are saturated and controlled by love just as Jesus was the embodiment of God's love. The goal is that our lives will be completely taken up in this love and all our relationships will be marked by this love.

Again, like all believers, the LGBTQ person experiences sanctifying grace. One's sexual orientation is not an impediment to this maturing process. A LGBTQ believer can experience the fullness of grace just like a straight believer because what is most important is our identity in Christ. Citing an ancient baptismal formula, Paul declared "There is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-28). Ultimately, our genders and sexuality are secondary to the primary identity we have been given through the grace of God. What defines us is God's love. This is what Peter discovered when he met Cornelius's people, and it is what we have discovered at North.

## **NORTH CHURCH AND THE LGBTQ BELIEVER**

Just as the church in Acts opened its doors to the Gentile, so today we should imitate the early church's inclusion and equality in the Spirit. If the heart of Christianity is the Spirit of Christ in your heart, then the heart of the church is the unity of believers in the Spirit of Christ. We are united by the living presence of Jesus Christ. The Spirit of the risen Christ is in each believer and is among us, connecting us to one another: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" and "it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God" (Romans 8:14, 16). The presence of the Spirit of Jesus Christ animating the life of each believer and empowering our shared life is what unites the church. Doctrinal standards and administrative structures are important and necessary, but they are secondary to the presence and unity of the Spirit. These other features of the church are at best useless and at worst cruel, unless Jesus is actively present in us and among us.

The denomination must realign itself with this spiritual reality. Everything that we do, all our policies and practices, need to conform and be transformed by the faith that "all who are led by the Spirit are the children of God." Instead of this "spiritual perspective" to be curtailed by various forms of cooption, we need to follow it to its logical conclusion. What I am proposing is not that we abandon this "traditional talk" about the Spirit, but rather that we follow it to its radical conclusions and its fullest implications. If we truly believe that the Spirit who unites us is in the lives of all believers, then we must:

- Offer the covenant of marriage to LGBTQ persons for the nurturing of their growth in faith, which is fostered in such covenant relationships.
- Ordain LGBTQ persons who have been called and gifted by the Spirit for the sake of the church and its mission and renewal.

These are not "human rights;" they are acts of fidelity to the Spirit who has brought us together in the church. Not to perform them is to grieve the Holy Spirit.

And our polity must conform to the work of the Holy Spirit. If the denomination does not conform to the presence of the Spirit, then it *should* splinter and break because we are not united for the sake of unity but for the sake of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Spirit can work even through broken denominational systems and does bring new forms of organizational unity out of such brokenness. By the same token, unity can be expressed in a variety of organizational ways. Unity is not achieved through structures that compromise the integrity of our varied ministries. This is the criterion by which all three options should be weighed.

As for this congregation, we must prepare for an uncertain future. The only way to prepare for an uncertain future is for us to put our focus on the one whose presence is certain. We must be united in our desire to live together in the Spirit of Christ. Our focus and our common pursuit must be for the Spirit to be in control of our lives. What will hold us together is not a polite tolerance that avoids intimacy. What will hold us together is not a shared set of political perspectives about the current state of society. What will hold us together is not a shared taste in music and worship. None of those will go the distance through tough times and hard conversations; none of those things will help us reconcile with each other after we have made mistakes. The unity that truly unites is the gift of the Spirit and our common desire to seek the Spirit.

## **MEMBERSHIP AND THE LGBTQ BELIEVER**

Just as Cornelius and his people were baptized in the name of Jesus, all of us are invited to put our trust in Christ, receive the Holy Spirit, and seek to follow Jesus. This is the heart and soul of church membership. Do you love Jesus and want to have the Spirit of Christ in your heart? And are you seeking to bear the fruit of the Spirit in your life?

Each of us needs the support and accountability of active membership in order to grow in our faith. When the Holy Spirit gives new life to an individual, the Spirit also connects the individual with other believers. The Spirit uses these relationships as the means by which we receive the grace that calls, forgives and matures us. This communal dynamic of the Spirit is at the heart of what it means to be the church. The ritual of membership is a public celebration in which we affirm that we will participate in this communal work of the Spirit.

## **THE OFFICIAL STANCE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

Unfortunately, our understanding of the church differs from the official teachings of our denomination. Even though membership in the United Methodist Church is open to all people, its official teaching is that “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 2016 *Book of Discipline*, ¶ 161 G.

In a later section of the “Social Principles,” civil rights are affirmed:

“Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to supporting those rights and liberties for all persons, regardless of sexual orientation. We see a clear issue of simple justice in protecting the rightful claims where people have shared material resources, pensions, guardian relationships, mutual powers of attorney, and other such lawful claims typically attendant to contractual relationships that involve shared contributions, responsibilities, and liabilities, and equal protection before the law. Moreover, we support efforts to stop violence and other forms of coercion against all persons, regardless of sexual orientation<sup>3</sup>.”

However, this paragraph does not negate the former. What is implied is a double standard where the church operates with one set of values governing its internal relations and another set which guides its relationship with society. Even its more liberal stance toward civil society is limited. For example, on marriage the “Social Principles” state “We support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.”<sup>4</sup> United Methodists who support the current language of the “Social Principles” do not see this as a contradiction. They assert that defending civil rights while prohibiting the acceptance of homosexuality in the church is an act of loving people we disagree with while maintaining one’s integrity.

General Conference, the highest legislative body in the denomination, has repeatedly taken steps to implement the prohibition on homosexuality throughout “The Book of Discipline.” “The Book of Discipline” (often referred to simply as the “Discipline”), contains the policies and doctrines that apply to every local church. Only General Conference can change the “Discipline” at its quadrennial meetings. One section of the “Discipline” is “The Social Principles,” which is the official teachings of the denomination on a wide range of social issues, including sexuality. They too are amendable by the General Conference, but they are not considered church law that members must conform to. Rather they “are intended to be instructive and persuasive in the best of the prophetic spirit.”<sup>5</sup> It is left to each General Conference whether or not to implement the “Social Principles” into the church law that is contained in the rest of the “Discipline.” Any United Methodist can send a petition to the General Conference to change our policies and practices. Over the years thousands of petitions have been sent to the General Conference urging the delegates to tighten and loosen its stance on homosexuality.

For nearly 50 years, General Conference has incrementally implemented the “Social Principles” into the actual policies of the denomination so that today:

- No “self-avowed, practicing homosexuals” can be “certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve” in our churches.
- No denominational agency shall fund “any gay caucus or....use such funds to promote the acceptance of homosexuality.”

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., ¶ 162 J.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., ¶ 161 C.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

- Pastors are prohibited from performing and congregations are forbidden from hosting gay marriages and holy unions.
- Clergy can be put on trial and defrocked for violating these rules.<sup>6</sup>

LGBTQ persons are not prohibited from church membership or leadership as laypeople. Overall, as society has become more tolerant on this issue, the United Methodist Church has become more conservative.

## THE LOYAL OPPOSITION

We agree with the mission statement of the United Methodist Church: "The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." And yet, our denominational structure has made it difficult for us to fulfill this mission at North. The consequences of our denominational structure contributed to the decision to join RMN.

The United Methodist Church is a "connectional system." Unlike most other American Protestant congregations, every local United Methodist Church is governed by "The Book of Discipline." When you join the United Methodist Church you are becoming a member of the denomination as well as the local congregation. The General Conference is the only body that can speak for the entire denomination, which it does through quadrennial revisions to "The Book of Discipline" and other related resolutions. There is great strength in being a part of a worldwide denomination that is informed by a wide spectrum of members and can speak with one voice.

However, being connectional also means that the denomination is, by default, speaking for North Church on the issue of homosexuality. Expressing our dissent is essential for the integrity of our witness to our community. Board member Ron Gifford put it best in his remarks to the Board of Directors when the vote was taken:

"If you didn't know anything about North other than that our last name was 'United Methodist Church'.... what might you assume about North's beliefs on the matter, in the absence of any other information? We cannot in good conscience remain silent and let others speak on our behalf to tell the world that we believe something that we do not believe."

We have joined RMN in order to bear witness that "God intends that the world shall be transformed into the full expression of Christ's inclusive love" in and through the United Methodist Church (RMN vision statement).

God has called us to be the loyal opposition. We will not disobey the "Book of Discipline," but we will express our dissent. There is not nor ever has been a prohibition on disagreement and dissent in Methodism. Indeed, it is a part of keeping covenant to speak the truth in love in order to make the church a more effective means of grace for all people.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., ¶s 304.3; 613.19; 806.9; 341.6; 2702.1(b).

What we stand against is the straightjacketing of the Holy Spirit. Currently the United Methodist Church “grieves the Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 4:30) by refusing the rites of marriage and ordination to queer believers. Nevertheless, North will continue to practice and advocate for the polity of the denomination to conform to the spiritual reality of the church as the body of Christ.

Let us join together in the spiritual tie that binds. The Spirit of God who shows no partiality has brought us together in Christ Jesus.

**RESOLUTION REAFFIRMING STATEMENT OF INCLUSION SUPPORTING  
FULL, EQUAL STATUS OF ALL PERSONS IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

*The Board of Directors of North United Methodist Church hereby adopts the following resolution on behalf of the congregation of North UMC:*

1. On September 28, 2011, the Board adopted the attached “Resolution Supporting Full, Equal Status and Participation of All Persons in the United Methodist Church.”
2. That Resolution states, in part: “The people of North United Methodist Church declare their conviction that all persons, including those persons who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered, are children of God and as such are entitled to full and equal status and participation within the United Methodist Church. Consistent with this conviction, the people of North United Methodist Church call upon the 2012 General Conference of The United Methodist Church to remove all language from the “Book of Discipline” that classifies and discriminates against persons based on homosexuality[.]”
3. The 2019 Special Session of the General Conference will convene in St. Louis on February 23, 2019 to receive and act on a report from the Commission on a Way Forward concerning the church’s position on the full inclusion of LGTBQ persons in the church.
4. In anticipation of that Special Session, the Board hereby reaffirms in the strongest terms the September 2011 Resolution, and calls upon the members of the Special Session (1) to remove all language from the “Book of Discipline” that classifies and discriminates against persons based on sexual orientation and gender preference, and (2) to include all necessary language in the “Book of Discipline” to ensure the full, equal status and participation of all persons within the United Methodist Church.

Adopted this 23rd day of January 2019.