



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, 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 U.S.A.

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 Minister

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Revised 2020

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 which, according to their 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.’ Their vision statement:

‘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 which 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.'¹ 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 which 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 one and two 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 sin 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 twenty calls for the death penalty. 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

¹ 2016 *Book of Discipline*, ¶ 161 G.

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 prostitute 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 First 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 because it makes the case because it appears to be timeless and it applies to both women and men. 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 First Corinthians and First 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 which 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 One, like Leviticus, reflects a culturally conditioned worldview and ancient assumptions about nature and biology. Specifically, it condemns idolatry and sexual practices related to idolatry.

- **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). Traditionalist combine this with Romans One 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 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 sexual relations within the context of a covenant relationship between two mutually consenting adults because this was not conceivable given the cultural setting and ancient worldview of its Jewish 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 nineteenth 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. They have 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 their interpretation 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. First 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 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 which 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 scriptures 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 which 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 TEN 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 Ten 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 it would make you unclean.

However, Peter went and preached to Cornelius' 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 Two). He baptized Cornelius' 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' 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).

What God did in the first century with the Gentiles, I believe, 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 Ten 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 ourselves and others. 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 lifelong process of reconciliation, recovery and renewal that culminates in the gift of eternal life. The Spirit of Christ in our hearts that 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 'the order of salvation' which 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 which 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.

When a person becomes aware of prevenient grace and accepts God's love this is the second stage. 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 which 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 which 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 we are given new life by the Spirit working within us. 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 lifelong maturing process in which our actions and attitude 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. An 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 that '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' 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 church are, at best, useless or, 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, to 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.’²

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 orientation³.’

However, this paragraph does not negate the former. What is implied is a double standard in which the church operates with one set of values governing its internal relations and another set which guides

² 2016 *Book of Discipline*, ¶ 161 G.

³ *Ibid.*, ¶ 162 J.

its relationship with society. Even its more liberal stance toward civil society is limited. For example, on marriage the Social Principles state that ‘we support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.’⁴ 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 which 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 ‘are intended to be instructive and persuasive in the best of the prophetic spirit.’⁵ It is left to each General Conference whether or not to implement the Social Principles into church law which 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 our stance on homosexuality.

For nearly fifty 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.’
- 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.⁶

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

In a failed attempt to resolve the conflict in the denomination, the General Conference held a special session in 2019. The General Conference reaffirmed the denomination’s traditional policies and doubled down on measures to stop opposition. It established a minimum penalty of one year suspension without pay for any pastor who is found guilty of performing a same-sex wedding or of being a “self-avowed,

⁴ Ibid., ¶ 161 C.

⁵ Ibid., p. 105.

⁶ Ibid., ¶s 304.3; 613.19; 806.9; 341.6; 2702.1(b).

practicing homosexual.” It also eliminated loopholes in the *Discipline* that had been used to avoid punishment for infractions.

NORTH’S POLICIES AND PRACTICES

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 United Methodist local 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 which 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 which 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 they took the vote:

‘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.’

Since joining RMN in 2011, many other developments in the denomination and society have necessitated North reaffirming, clarifying and expanding its witness for inclusion in a series of board resolutions:

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 LGBTQ 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 23 day of January 2019.

STATEMENT ON SUSPENSION OF PAYMENT OF CHURCH TITHE AND RELATED MATTERS

The Board of Directors of North United Methodist Church has released the following Statement regarding its decisions on March 27, 2019 to suspend payment of the church tithe (apportionments) to the Indiana Annual Conference and to approve related matters.

1. The Traditional Plan adopted by the General Conference in St. Louis, which perpetuates language in the Book of Discipline that classifies and discriminates against persons based on sexual orientation and gender identity, is wholly incompatible with the convictions of North Church and its congregation. We reiterate without question our belief that all persons, including LGBTQ persons, are wholly the children of God and as such are entitled to full and equal status and participation in the United Methodist Church.
2. The adoption of the Traditional Plan, and the continued inclusion of these discriminatory provisions in the Book of Discipline, call into serious question whether North Church, and other like-minded Methodist churches, can continue to be affiliated with a denomination that embraces policies that denigrate and harm members of our congregation.
3. There is much uncertainty over what will or should happen now to the United Methodist Church as a denomination. It now appears that we will not have clarity about critical issues regarding the future of the denomination until after the next General Conference is held in May 2020. This includes the question of the so-called “gracious exit;” that is, the ability of a local church to leave the denomination.

4. This much is clear today, however: there is currently no process by which North or any other local church can simply disaffiliate from the broader denomination and continue in ministry in this location as a congregation independent of the United Methodist Church. Under our connectional system, all property of the local church is actually held in trust by the Annual Conference, meaning that legally, we do not own our building or our property. If this congregation were to leave the denomination today, we would have no legal right to remain in our building or on this property.
5. While the resolution of these broader denominational issues is uncertain and lies in the future, we know that the harm and the pain that the 2019 General Conference has caused for many of our members is current and very real. We acknowledge that pain and hurt and seek ways to help heal those wounds.
6. The Board of Directors of North Church is committed to maintaining our congregation's public witness for full inclusion of all persons within the Church. We are committed to distancing North in every way possible from the denomination's policies of exclusion and discrimination. We are committed to having North continue its leadership role in promoting full inclusion of all persons in the Church.
7. As such, we unanimously approved the following actions at our Board meeting on March 27, 2019:
 - a. Effectively immediately, we are suspending payment of the church tithe (also known as apportionments) to the Indiana Annual Conference. This suspension will remain in effect until further action by the Board.
 - b. This fall, North will host a day-long conference/workshop for the laity and clergy of other United Methodist Churches who wish to learn from our history of embracing inclusion and its public witness in order to become more inclusive in their own churches.
 - c. Pastor Darren Cushman Wood will convene a task force of North members to craft a theological statement on inclusion based on the theology of John Wesley. This statement will serve as an additional public witness of our beliefs.
 - d. We appointed Amy Sell to serve as one of our delegates to the Indiana Annual Conference.
8. In the coming weeks and months, we will continue to seek guidance on these issues through prayerful deliberation and open dialogue. We appreciate the many thoughtful conversations that we have had with many in the congregation and encourage all persons in the congregation to continue sharing their thoughts and concerns with the Board and others in church leadership.

RESOLUTION CONCERNING USE OF CHURCH FACILITIES FOR WEDDINGS

The congregation of North United Methodist Church has declared its belief that all persons, including those persons who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered, are wholly the children of God and as such are entitled to full and equal status and participation within the United Methodist Church.

Policies and practices of the United Methodist Church that classify and/or discriminate against persons based on sexual orientation and gender identity are incompatible with those beliefs and our understanding of the role of the church in expressing God's love for all persons.

In particular, the Book of Discipline states: "Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches." Par. 341.6. We find this policy to be inconsistent with our understanding of Scripture and our beliefs as rooted in our Wesleyan tradition.

North's Wedding Policy (regarding the use of the church for wedding ceremonies) states that weddings are "worship services to celebrate God's gift of love and to affirm a covenant between two people and God." We believe that the use of North's worship space should be available to all persons who are prepared to make such a covenant and whose request has been approved by North Church clergy pursuant to our Wedding Policy.

THEREFORE, the Board of Directors of North United Methodist Church hereby adopts the following Resolution:

1. We affirm and support the prayerful discernment and decisions of North Church clergy in officiating wedding ceremonies for any prepared couple who comes to them.
2. With the approval of the Senior Pastor and in compliance with North Church policies, any prepared couple may hold their wedding at North Church.
3. The Board reaffirms our policy that weddings are "worship services" and must be conducted as such, with appropriate guidance and approvals by North Church clergy. The use of North Church's worship spaces by any person is a privilege, not a right.
4. The Board directs the staff to update the Wedding Policy in light of this Resolution, in particular by the following: (1) replace gender specific references in the Policy with inclusive language concerning the persons to be married; and (2) add a policy prohibiting any press or media organization from broadcasting or recording for later broadcast any part of a wedding ceremony unless prior written approval has been granted by the Senior Pastor.

This Resolution is adopted this 26 day of June, 2019, and is effective immediately upon adoption.

THE NORTH DECLARATION

Introduction

North United Methodist Church is an inclusive congregation with a heritage and a hope of welcoming all people and honoring the diversity in our congregation for the mission of Christ and to the glory of God. We are a church where spiritual journeys meet, and throughout our history we have engaged complex and controversial issues with study and honest conversation that has enriched our journey.

Our denomination is currently in a moment of crisis that creates an opportunity for us to reexamine and clarify who we are as Methodists.

This statement is the result of a congregational process of theological reflection and conversation. It expresses the Wesleyan foundation of our congregation's life and mission. Its purpose is to be educational and informative for this moment in the life of our congregation and denomination.

This declaration is not a comprehensive summary of church doctrine. We acknowledge that there are other ways to express one's beliefs in our congregation and the denomination. This declaration only addresses how the issues of sexuality relate to our core Methodist beliefs. We realize that there are additional issues, such as racism and neo-colonialism, which have complex relationships with issues of sexuality. We see this declaration as one small part of a larger vision of liberation.

Our prayer is that God will use this declaration to inform and inspire the reader as they grow in grace.

The Declaration

Image of God

We believe all persons are created in the image of God. We see God in the uniqueness of each person and we experience God through loving one another and being loved by one another.

We reject any interpretation of God's image that limits it to one sexual orientation or gender identity.

Sin

We believe sin is any human action, attitude, policy, or system that violates the image of God in humanity. All persons are drawn to sin and participate in sinful behavior and systems.

We reject the naming of any sexual orientation, gender identification, and loving, same-sex intimate relationship as sinful and reject the shaming of people for being the persons God created them to be.

Prevenient Grace

We believe God's prevenient grace protects all persons from the full effects of sin through relationships, spaces, and social movements that are safe, affirming, and draw us away from life-threatening shame and show us that we are loved by God.

We reject that God's prevenient grace is experienced only through the church. We refuse to believe that God cannot work through that which the church has ignored or rejected.

Repentance

We believe that repentance is a conscious decision to turn to God and away from harming others and ourselves, and to accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression.

We reject harmful acts of repentance such as emotional manipulation, shaming, and conversion therapy that lead a person to reject who God created them to be.

Justifying Grace

We believe that justifying grace is God's unconditional acceptance and forgiveness. It is uniquely expressed to each person who receives it by faith in Christ.

We reject that one must be cisgender, be straight, act straight, or be celibate to receive justifying grace.

Sanctifying Grace

We believe that sanctifying grace (holiness) is the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit restoring our lives and renewing the world with the love and liberation of God.

We reject any idea of holiness that requires a person to deny or attempt to change their sexual orientation or gender identity to be a whole person in Christ.

The Church and Ordination

We believe the church is the work of the Holy Spirit bringing together all who seek to love and serve Christ through our diversity. We believe the church is called to be a means of grace to the world. We believe that the Spirit calls LGBTQIA believers into ordained ministry for the sake of the church's mission, and the church must open its practices to the work of the Spirit.

We reject any definition or practice of the church that grieves the Holy Spirit by delaying reforms, by placing institutional preservation over the calling of our siblings in Christ, or by allowing some parts of the church to discriminate.

Marriage

We believe marriage is a covenant of mutual love and service between two persons whom God has brought together to deepen and express their faith.

We reject any definition of marriage that limits it to only a man and a woman.

Scripture

We believe the purpose of scripture is to be a means of grace through which the Holy Spirit breathes life into our relationship with God, ourselves, and others. We believe the Spirit accomplishes this when we study the Bible with prayer, scholarly inquiry, and communal reflection.

We reject any theology that uses the Bible to exclude, shame, or perpetuate violence against LGBTQIA persons.

CONCLUSION

As Wesleyans, our best theology is sung. A deeper and fuller understanding of this declaration comes by singing together:

Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven to earth come down:
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown:
Jesus, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation,
enter every trembling heart.

Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit
into every troubled breast;
let us all in thee inherit,
let us find that second rest:
take away our bent to sinning;
Alpha and Omega be;
end of faith, as its beginning,
set our hearts at liberty.

Come, Almighty to deliver,
let us all thy life receive;
suddenly return, and never,
nevermore thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray and praise thee without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.

Finish, then, thy new creation;
pure and spotless let us be:
let us see thy great salvation
perfectly restored in thee;
changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Adopted by the Board of Directors of North United Methodist Church, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA on 22 January 2020.