



## **North Church & the LGBT 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). 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: My use of various terms is imprecise. Labels such as 'homosexuality,' 'LGBTQ,' and 'gay,' are used without precision in order to reflect the way they are used in popular culture. It is not the purpose of this booklet to explore the differences in their usage and meanings. Human sexuality is far too complex to be reduced to simple categories of gay and straight. But for the sake of brevity and ease of reading, I have used these terms interchangeably.

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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# 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 is a caucus of progressive 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 180 people.

While North's tradition of inclusivity of LGBTQ persons began decades earlier, this overtly political stance 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 has stated: *'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.

## **WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS—AND DOES NOT SAY**

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

One must remember that every translation is an interpretation in the words that are used. The word 'homosexual' never appears

in scripture because it is terminology from 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 was designed to preserve the ritual and moral integrity of Israel in contrast to other nations. The verse in chapter 18 is linked to a reference to the worship of the god Molech which involved human sacrifices. Sometimes the worship of foreign gods involved temple prostitution and other sex acts. The prohibition in verse 22 was made in this context. Chapter 20 discusses family relations and the kinds of prohibitions needed to preserve the social order. Both chapters condemn only male sexual relations. The latter calls for the death penalty. The cultural context of Leviticus is vastly different from today and thus cannot be taken literally or applied directly to our contemporary context. We do not follow other Old Testament regulations. For example, we do not prohibit husbands from having sex with their menstruating wives even though this is condemned in Leviticus 18:19. In the same way, we can sit 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 2 other words: *arsen*=male, and *koite*=bed. There are two things to keep in mind: 1) often in Greek compound words, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the two words denotes the action and the 1<sup>st</sup> 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* (which is where we get the word pornography) can mean a male prostitute but also can refer 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 universal (for example, it applies to men and women). Also, 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 spells out the ethical consequences of idolatry. Paul's argument is that all people are in need of 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. 'Degrading passions' in verse 26 (or 'shameful lusts' in the NIV) 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 reflects a culturally conditioned worldview. Specifically, it is condemning idolatry and sexual practices which stem from the practice of idolatry—either specifically temple prostitution of men or more generally a

culture of sexual exploitation that was a part of a society shaped by the values of idolatry. 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.

The sparse references to 'homosexuality' in the Bible are culturally conditioned, often in connection with idolatry and always presupposing that the only expressions of homosexuality are relationships of exploitation and promiscuity. All forms of exploitation and promiscuity—homosexual, heterosexual and everything in-between—are sinful. However, the Bible says nothing about same gender sexual 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 what the Bible says 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 does! They pick and choose favorite quotes to justify their beliefs rather than letting scripture challenge them to change their way of thinking.

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.

All conservative United Methodists affirm the ordination of women and are tolerant of divorce. They are committed to human rights and condemn domestic violence. And yet, there are clear biblical prohibitions of both. They accept scientific insights on a host of other topics and believe that this knowledge is compatible

with scripture. They 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 you do not take it literally does not mean that you are not a Christian. Most abolitionists and early feminists were devout Evangelical Christians, but they were not literalist in their use of scripture. 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.

Scripture still has primary authority for our faith and its authority comes from 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 LGBTQ persons. 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. It is ‘a sufficient rule of faith and practice,’ as it says in our Articles of Religion. 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 through the witness of believers today. 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 for today, 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 sexual orientation has complex origins and development and is 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 which have been modeled for us by Jesus Christ in all of 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 (and referenced numerous times in Paul's letters) describes the early church's struggle over the question of requirements for Gentile converts.

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 the sincerity of 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' 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 gay brothers and sisters. '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—authoritative example—that supports full inclusion.

A thoughtful reading of scripture reveals that the Bible is limited in what it says directly about homosexuality. 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 gay brothers and sisters 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—gay or straight, sexual or non-sexual.

## **THE GRACE OF GOD AND THE LGBTQ BELIEVER**

The love of God we find through Jesus Christ is our salvation. And yet, this simple truth has been used to hurt LGBTQ

individuals. They have been told that Jesus can save them from being gay and that they must be converted into a heterosexual. The net effect is not life and peace but shame and anxiety.

If homosexuality is not a sin, then we need a new understanding of salvation. The core beliefs of Methodism provide a helpful solution. We believe that all persons are created in the image of God and that sin is anything that violates or distorts the divine image. Salvation is a restoration or renewing of God's image in us.

In the case of our sexuality, we live in a sinful context of repression and exploitation. On the one hand, social forces causes the LGBTQ person to hate themselves and question how God created them. This social dimension of sin is manifested in and perpetuated by complex legal, moral and religious systems. 'Original sin' is transmitted through these social channels. On the other hand, we react to this sinful context in sinful ways. This often takes the form of self-destructive behavior, from relationships that are harmful to oneself and others to religious acts of emotional and physical violence.

Salvation is a restoration of the image of God. Christ Jesus, who is the pure image and likeness of God, became human in order to renew every dimension of our humanity. Salvation is a lifelong process of reconciliation, recovery and renewal by God which culminates in the gift of eternal life. It is not an escape from being human but rather our fulfillment as human beings. For the LGBTQ believer, salvation is not a denial or escape from how God made

you 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 what they called 'the order of salvation' which describes the dynamic process of 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 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 and repent. We 'accept that we have been accepted,' according to theologian Paul Tillich. This acceptance precipitates a change of attitude and behavior which we call repentance. We renounce our participation in sin to affirm our obedience to Christ.

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 sexual 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 gay 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 spiritual life through the Spirit. Sanctification is a lifelong maturing process in which our actions and attitude are reshaped to reflect the life of Christ. It does not make us 'holier than thou' but rather it makes us whole by restoring the image of God through the Spirit of Christ who was the full image and likeness of God.

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 gender and our sexual identities are secondary to the primary identity we have been given through the grace of God. 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

Like Peter, I believe that God embraces my gay brothers and sisters. Just as the Church in Acts opened its doors to the Gentile, so today we should imitate the early Church and offer the fullness of the sacrament of baptism (which expresses the gifts of membership and leadership) to anyone regardless of their sexual orientation.

And just as Cornelius was baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, all of us—gay or straight or questioning or anything else—are still required to put our trust in Jesus Christ and seek to follow his ways. This is the heart and soul of Church membership. Do you want to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? Do you love Jesus and want to have His Spirit in your heart? And are you seeking to bear the fruit of His Spirit in your life?

To be sure, this does not water down the meaning of membership. Do not join this church if you are going to act as if it just another club or you are doing your civic duty by showing up only on Easter and Christmas for the big show. Joining the church is a part of one's discipleship because the church is the assembly of those who are striving together to be faithful followers of Jesus.

Indeed, 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.

But you do not have to be straight in order to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. Indeed, it is in all our relationships—be they gay or straight, sexual or non-sexual—that we seek is to bear the fruit of the Spirit and to follow Christ together. Just as you did not need to be circumcised to follow Jesus in the first century, so now you do not have to be straight in order to follow Jesus. As your pastor, there is nothing more that I will require of you than to join us in seeking Christ together.

If this is the core meaning of membership then we will not become a single issue church. Our focus at North is not on being a ‘gay church’ or any other kind of church. Our mission is, as stated by our denomination, is to ‘make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.’ Membership in the Reconciling Ministries Network assists us in accomplishing this mission because it opens the church to people who have been rejected and told that they can never be true disciples. Thus, inclusivity is not the end but a means. The end goal is discipleship. It is to help each of us on our common journey to become more faithful in following Jesus Christ who commands us to love one another as he loved us.

# THE OFFICIAL STANCE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

We journey with other United Methodists in the pursuit of this goal. However, it is a journey marked by disagreement. Like any road trip, our family argues over the best route to take.

In the last hour of the 1972 General Conference, the legislative body which sets policy for the denomination, took a different direction. The weary delegates adopted a statement on homosexuality which said: *'The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching<sup>2</sup>.'* The original motion ended at 'homosexuality,' but in the closing session an amendment reoriented the statement in the opposition direction by adding that it is 'incompatible with Christian teaching.' For forty years this has been the official position of the denomination.

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 in which 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 that ‘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.

Over the past forty years, General Conference has 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<sup>5</sup>.’ 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.

And over the 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<sup>6</sup>

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.

The conservative trend has been the result of complex politics and the unique polity of the denomination. On the one hand, conservative caucuses, such as Good News and Confessing Movement, have effectively gotten delegates elected to General Conference who support their position. At times, they have convinced moderate delegates to retain the prohibition in order to prevent schism. On the other hand, the organizational structure of the denomination has not allowed for a more flexible structure which could allow for regional differences on this issue.

## **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 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.’

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).

Why not leave The United Methodist Church? Legally, our property is held in trust with the denomination. On a deeper level, we refuse to leave our heritage which continues to nurture our spirits. We believe that God is still working for good in the world

through our denomination and that God's Spirit is working to renew our denomination from within. The doctrines and spiritual practices of the Wesleyan tradition continue to be channels of God's grace for us. Even though we disagree with one provision in the Social Principles, we still believe that they are a relevant prophetic witness. In short, we will not leave because we are United Methodists. We refuse to allow those who disagree with us to define what it means to be a 'true' Methodist based on a single issue. We do not ask them to agree with us, only to make room for us.

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 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.

What we stand against is the straight jacketing of the Holy Spirit. Our current stance is an attempt to restrict the Spirit to work within current political and cultural categories. In America today we are tempted to put people in one-dimensional categories: liberal-conservative, gay-straight, pro-choice—pro-life, etc. General Conference has fallen into the temptation of mimicking this pattern. According to the world's standards, you are either on one side or the other. One-dimensional categories do not help us make disciples. Only baptism does, and in baptism we are called by name

and not by category. Christ calls you by name, with all your ambiguities and contradictions and uniqueness, to follow him by loving one another.

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.

