



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

NEW YORK EPISCOPAL AREA

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*But now thus says the Lord,
(the One) who created you, O Jacob,
(the One) who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you. . . .
⁴Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you, . . .
(Isaiah 43: 1-2, 4a)*

February 28, 2019

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

I greet you in the precious name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

The special called session of the General Conference has concluded with results that have confirmed the divisions and disagreements that exist within our church. By a vote of 438 to 384, the General Conference voted to support the Traditional Plan, which maintains and strengthens the current stance of our Book of Discipline. This decision has left some confused and disheartened, while others feel affirmed by this direction.

Much of the plan passed has already been ruled “unconstitutional” and not in compliance with our Book of Discipline. The entire Traditional Plan has been referred to our Judicial Council for a complete review. In addition, a plan to allow churches to disaffiliate with The United Methodist Church was passed. It too has been referred to the Judicial Council to determine whether or not it is compliant with the provisions of our Book of Discipline. The Judicial Council will be meeting April 23-25 to determine the outcome of these decisions.

Some provisions of the approved plan maintain the current stance of the church while increasing accountability around issues related to same sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQIA persons. It will take some time to determine which sections of this plan will become a part of our discipline and order. I will outline each of these decisions at our special called

session of the Annual Conference on March 16th. The purpose of that gathering is to provide clarity and information on these matters.

I want to acknowledge the faithful and hard work of those who were elected as your delegates to this Special Session. They were faithful to their convictions and maintained their integrity throughout the difficult moments of this conference. They, along with the gallery of concerned persons from the New York Conference, bore witness to the love of God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by their prayers, their presence, their gifts, their service and, most especially, their witness.

The passage of the Traditional Plan has caused a great deal of pain and harm to many on both sides of the dialogue. It will require each of us to continue to listen deeply to one another and to work hard to model a spirit of Christian love. The vote at the Special Session was close (53 percent in favor of the Traditional Plan and 47 percent against). The results demonstrate that we need to be especially mindful of one another during this vulnerable and tender time in the life of our church and in the lives of all of our people. The New York Conference is a very diverse body of people with many distinct viewpoints. Yet, we have been able over the years to demonstrate how people from many walks and understandings of life can dwell together in ministry. We need to continue to witness to this fact as we navigate through these days of uncertainty.

What enables us to do this, in fact, are the words from the prophet in the book of Isaiah. The reminders of the prophet are clear: you and I are created, formed, redeemed, and known by our creator God. We are not abandoned when times are difficult. Rather, God is with us, all of us, because we are precious in the sight of God, honored and loved.

I want to offer a special word to those in the LGBTQIA community. The decisions of this Special Session have indeed made you feel as if you were erased and are unimportant. You were the subject of a conversation that has caused a deepened sense of alienation and harm within you. I want you to know that although you may not feel welcomed completely at the table, you are deeply loved and supported by many. You are precious in the sight of God and honored by me and by many who share the journey of life and ministry with you. That posture of love and grace does not change because of a decision at the General Conference. As we continue to work for the full inclusion of LGBTQIA persons in the life of our church, we will continue to love and support you each step of the journey.

I want you to envision a vine emerging from the soil. Now envision another vine that emerges next to it. Over time the two vines become entwined. As the vines grow the branches become so woven together that you cannot tell which branch belongs to what vine. If someone comes along to prune the vines, in all likelihood both vines will experience hurt in process. If someone comes along to fertilize the branches, both parts will be strengthened by the nourishment provided.

Friends, even though we continue to find disagreement and division in our church, we have been woven together for a very long time. Our lives have been and continue to be intertwined because of the mutual ministry we share. The Apostle Paul said it best when he wrote to the

church in Corinth, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." (1 Corinthians 12:26)

This interweaving of our lives as United Methodist Christians means that we must exercise great love for one another for the sake of our public witness, for the preservation of the mission of the church to offer Christ to the world, and for the care we need to show for one another. Please remember today that there are members of our body who are suffering, confused, and feeling very much alone. Beloved, regardless of the decisions made, regardless of what position you take, let us do all we can to love one another in these days of uncertainty.

The road in front of us will be challenging and difficult. But in the midst of those challenges, I pledge to walk with each of you every step of that journey. The New York Conference is a beautiful example of the body of Christ and I am so deeply blessed to be a part of your lives. We are in this together and we will find our way together as we seek to remain open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

Remember today that each of you are thought of, prayed for, and loved.

The Journey Continues, . . .

Peace & Blessings,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Thomas J. Bickerton".

Thomas J. Bickerton
Resident Bishop