



A MESSAGE FROM PASTOR ALAN

February 27, 2019

Dear First UMC Church Family,

Grace and Peace to You in the Name of the Risen Christ!

General Conference ended yesterday evening, and there is already a lot of news being generated about what happened. I will be away from church this Sunday, as Morgan and I are taking a long-planned trip to visit her brother and our sister-in-law to attend a baby shower for them in California. I regret deeply that I will not be present to worship and share Holy Communion with you on this first Sunday following the special session of General Conference. So, I thought it might be helpful to share with you the events of the General Conference, at least from my perspective.

What Happened at General Conference 2019 in Brief. Many of the news outlets are reporting that the Traditional Plan passed. This is true, but it is somewhat more complicated.

First, just a reminder of what each plan contained. The Traditional Plan retained the current language of the Discipline that holds the “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching,” prevents clergy from performing same sex marriages, and which prohibits the ordination of LGBTQ+ persons. It also creates swifter penalties for those who disobey. The One Church Plan would have amended the current language of the Discipline and allowed churches and/or Annual Conferences to decide their level of inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons.

Prior to the General Conference, the UMC Judicial Council reviewed each plan (Traditional, One Church, etc.) to determine if any of the provisions within each plan were unconstitutional. The Judicial Council determined that each plan contained elements that were unconstitutional. These unconstitutional elements would normally be fixed on the floor of General Conference.

The One Church Plan was defeated in committee on Monday and then defeated again in the plenary session on Tuesday when it was brought forward as the “minority report.” When the General Conference passed the Traditional Plan on Tuesday, those who had supported the more inclusive plans began trying to “run out the clock” by adding amendments. While the majority had the votes to pass the Traditional Plan, they were unable to fix all the unconstitutional elements. Therefore, many elements of it will certainly be found unconstitutional by the Judicial Council.

Disaffiliation Petition. The other provision that the General Conference passed was a disaffiliation petition that would make it easier for congregations—conservative or progressive—to leave the denomination if they cannot abide by the current language around human sexuality. Currently, the bar for leaving The UMC is very high because of what is known as the “trust clause.” Essentially, all buildings are held in trust by congregations, so if a congregation chose to leave The UMC, legally, their assets would revert to the Annual Conference. This was designed from the beginning of Methodism to make sure that congregations would not leave willy-nilly. Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Episcopalians all have similar provisions. In addition to property concerns, if a congregation were to leave, there would be issues such as unfunded pension liability and other financial obligations to the Annual Conference that would need to be resolved before a congregation could exit the denomination. The disaffiliation petition approved would lower that bar and make it easier for a congregation to leave. It is worth noting that the Judicial Council found certain parts of previous disaffiliation petitions unconstitutional, and it is not clear that the one the General Conference passed will stand up to scrutiny either. None of the provisions are set to take effect until January 1, 2020, so there is still a lot that can happen between now and then.

What It All Means. So, what does all of this mean? The first thing we need to acknowledge is that while a portion of the Traditional Plan will likely be struck down, the General Conference voted clearly to retain the Discipline’s current language

on human sexuality and against allowing churches to contextually practice fuller inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons. The media does not grasp the nuances of our polity and the fact that a portion of the Traditional Plan will not stand up to Judicial Council scrutiny. They will instead clearly report that the UMC refused to more fully include LGBTQ+ persons. As a result, many people are hurting very deeply. Many LGBTQ+ persons and supporters of full inclusion who worship in United Methodist Churches and many LGBTQ+ persons who are experiencing a call to ministry experience the vote of the General Conference as harmful. They are faced with deciding whether they ought to remain and continue advocating for full inclusion, or whether they should join another church that welcomes them. This includes persons from our congregation who are LGBTQ+ or who have LGBTQ+ family members. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 12 that if one part of the Body of Christ suffers, all the other parts suffer with it. Therefore, even if you are pleased the Traditional Plan passed, it is important to know that our beloved United Methodist Church is hurting and that we share that hurt together as members of Christ's body.

What does this mean for us at First United Methodist Church in Salem, VA? One of the things I have always valued about The United Methodist Church and our church in particular is that we are a place where person who hold diverse views can worship and serve the Risen Christ together. Our church is a place that I believe welcomes all people regardless of who they are because we want them to know the love of Jesus Christ and the welcome that he offers us. We are a people who believe in a theology centered around grace, and we have an awareness that we are all in deep need of that grace. As our vision affirms, we are a place where people **seek relationship with God, grow in faith, and serve God through care for others**. That vision exists without any qualifiers or reservations. That is who we are, and that is who we will continue to be. Baptism, Holy Communion, membership, and leadership in our church remains open to all persons. There has never been a barrier to any of that in the *Book of Discipline*. Regardless of what happens in The United Methodist Church, Jesus Christ remains the Head of the Church and the Lord of all Creation. It is he in whom we place our trust, and it is he in whom we find our hope. God's Holy Spirit who is the comforter, the counselor, the teacher, is with us, leading us, helping us to grow in love of God and neighbor. Therefore, even in the midst of all of the uncertainty and all of the pain, there is hope.

Peace,
Pastor Alan