



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Dakotas-Minnesota Area

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Dear Colleague in Christ's Ministry,

"To those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ. May mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance."

Jude, verses 1-2 (NRSV)

On May 14, 2013, Governor Dayton signed into law, legislation that legalizes same-sex marriage in Minnesota. Marriage licenses can be issued to same-sex couples on August 1, 2013.

In a country that has been a model for the world on the separation of Church and State, there is a deeply imbedded and cherished tradition of churches typically being the venues for state-sanctioned marriage, and pastors being the officiants and legal agents for the same. Thus, the legalization of same-sex marriage in Minnesota creates great conflict and has serious implications for the churches and pastors of the Minnesota Conference of The United Methodist Church.

This conflict exists precisely because the *Discipline* of The United Methodist Church prohibits its clergy from conducting holy unions or same-sex marriages or using our churches to conduct such ceremonies (§ 2702.1.b and ¶ 341.6, 2012 *Book of Discipline*).

The legalization of same-sex marriage by the state of Minnesota does not change the *Book of Discipline* or impact the polity of The United Methodist Church. The prohibitions in place restricting the actions of clergy and the use of property remain, regardless of state law. The ongoing and often debilitating conversation about homosexuality in our denomination and the action of the Minnesota state legislature are separate, but related, issues.

We, in The United Methodist Church across our global connection and even in the United States, are deeply divided over the full inclusion of gays and lesbians in the church and the specific issue of same-sex marriage. Some see marriage equality as a Civil Rights issue, providing to all citizens what is afforded to some. Others see same-sex marriage as an abandonment of the scriptural standard of God's revelation. Still others see same-sex marriage as a congruent expression of Jesus' radical love ethic and a logical expression of John Wesley's theology (based on Hebrews 2:9) of unlimited atonement – God sent Jesus for all people.

Since 1972, every General Conference has debated full inclusion. This is a debate that is diminishing our energy, eroding our missional impact, and distracting us from the many things that unite and connect us. I agree with many historians of the Methodist Movement that cite the inclusion of the "incompatibility" clause¹ in our *Social Principles* by the 1976 General Conference as the source of our current political impasse and ecclesiological conflict. Prior to 1976, the inclusion of homosexuals was a theological matter left to annual conferences to resolve in a pastoral manner.

As our denominational debate rages in the context of rapidly changing attitudes and laws, we are all aware there are passionate arguments using scripture, tradition, reason and experience from those opposed to full inclusion of gays and lesbians and those calling for full inclusion. I recognize that good people of faith will disagree about the church's position on matters of faith, theology, ecclesiology, culture and structure.

It breaks my heart when faithful people choose to stake out their respective corners in the big tent we call United Methodism. It grieves me when our differences divide us and set group against group, the majority position against the minority position, "winners" against "losers," people against people. I grieve that sometimes our differences are turned into anger and hatred. It breaks my heart when faithful United Methodists leave the church over the issues that too easily divide us.

As your bishop, I serve the whole church and I commit to work with all people. In the midst of this and other difficult matters of the church, I will strive to be fair and compassionate as I work to maintain the unity and witness of the church.

- As a United Methodist clergy, I cannot conduct a same-sex marriage. As a Bishop of the Church, I cannot give permission to any other United Methodist clergy to do so.
- As a United Methodist elder, I will uphold my ordination vow to "support and maintain our Church government and polity." As a Bishop of the Church, I will uphold our *Book of Discipline*. I am required to process any complaint brought to me, including any complaint of conducting a same-sex marriage.
- As a United Methodist pastor, I will struggle and agonize, listen and weep with you. As a Bishop of the Church, I will be available to any and all who are desperately, passionately seeking to live gracefully and faithfully with the new legal reality in Minnesota.

I respectfully invite all the clergy and laity of the Minnesota Conference to pray for one another in the midst of our differences and as we seek to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). Be bridge builders within our conference, your church and your community so that differences may be expressed and unity may prevail. Stay in conversation with one another, your congregations and the broader faith community on this difficult issue.

Remember and uphold our Church's unequivocal affirmation that "all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God." Remember we also "implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends, and we commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons" (Paragraph 161.F, 2012 *Book of Discipline*).

Respect the religious freedom and beliefs of all. The new same-sex marriage legislation does not mandate any clergyperson, congregation or church to do anything he or she does not want to do (or, in our case, what our *Discipline* says we cannot do). I implore you to respect the honest struggles, strong opinions and fundamental beliefs of one another. This is consistent with our United Methodist heritage

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and our shared practice of honoring the deeply held beliefs of others, even when we do not agree with them. On the occasion of riots opposing Methodism by Roman Catholics in Ireland, John Wesley wrote,

“Then, if we cannot as yet think alike in all things, at least we may love alike. Herein we cannot possibly do amiss.”

So, finally, I urge you to love like Jesus loves. This is the ancient and ultimate mark of what it means to be a Christian. And, it is what John Wesley said was the mark of a Methodist. There are very profound differences – fault lines, really – between United Methodists concerning homosexuality and same-sex marriage, but we are all called to love like Jesus. And, I believe we all want a future in which we consistently reflect the mark of a Methodist – staying in love with God and neighbor.

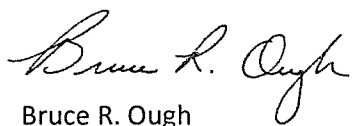
The future of The United Methodist Church will not be found in dogmatic conformity to any one expression and understanding of faithfulness. That is not the nature of a Spirit-driven revival movement. Instead, our future will be discovered as we open our hearts to the pain and wounds and brokenness present in the world around us; open our minds to revealed truth and the Spirit's continued work in and through the Body of Christ; and open our doors to all of God's beloved children.

I affirm that doctrinal clarity in our teaching, preaching, confessing and ordering of the Church is essential to the unity of the Body. However, I believe that doctrine will not ultimately, in itself, unite the Church. The biblical witness suggests otherwise. Authentic unity, which is so very elusive, but for which Jesus prayed (John 17:23) and urged us to bear witness to, is gift of the Holy Spirit – a Pentecost phenomenon – sent to those who abide in Christ's love and practice Christ's love.

I pray for you and our congregations daily. Thank you for being a minister or ambassador of the Gospel during some of the most challenging and for many, frustrating, times within The United Methodist Church. Your faithfulness and fruitfulness in the midst of the Church's struggle to make disciples, serve the poor, proclaim righteousness, love justice and transform the world is a testimony to the power and promise of the Resurrection.

With deepest gratitude for your servant leadership, I am

Yours in Christ's extravagant love,



Bruce R. Ough

¹The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. (Paragraph 161.F, page 111, *2012 Book of Discipline*.)