



Bashford United Methodist Church

The Place where Faith Makes a Difference

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On Congregational Care and the General Conference

Dear Bashford community,

As many of you likely know, the United Methodist Church recently held a special General Conference in St. Louis. The delegates and bishops, from all around the world, were meeting to discuss financial matters, as well as, in particular, whether or not people in same gender relationships can get married or become clergy. The subtext to these discussions, however, was years of disagreement within the denomination about how to interpret Scripture, how to live out the Gospel, and how inclusive to be as a Church. Several plans, with different components, were proposed on how to move forward as a denomination.

The Council of Bishops recommended a particular plan—the “One Church Plan”—that was a long time in the making. Basically it was a plan to “agree to disagree” while still being in ministry with one another. It was developed by a carefully chosen, ideologically-diverse committee. Despite the Bishops’ recommendation, however, a different plan, called the “Traditional Plan”, got the votes needed to pass. This plan actively promotes punishing clergy in same-gender relationships by taking away their credentials, prevents anyone in a same-gender relationship from becoming clergy, and prohibits same-gender marriage. It was a very close vote, and the Traditional Plan only passed with 53% of the votes.

While technically people in same-gender relationships weren’t supposed to be clergy or get married before, many congregations and a number of Conferences did not feel these rules were worth following, as no Conference follows the Book of Discipline to the letter. Everywhere, in all parts of the world, we have seen the Book of Discipline flexibly interpreted at times to allow ministry to flourish as best and justly it could. Functionally speaking, the Traditional Plan does not insist people follow the Book of Discipline more closely. It just targets people who have long been marginalized because of their gender identities and sexual orientations and tries to make them less visible in the life of the Church.

About half of the denomination is outraged, sad, and/or distraught over this vote, a vote that does not take people’s real, lived experiences in the world into account. According to the plan, pastors who have spent years visiting the sick, consecrating the elements, baptizing babies, and growing disciples for God would have to leave their pulpits. Loving marriages would be deemed invalid in the eyes of the Church. While the Traditional Plan needs to be looked over to make sure it is technically okay according to our Church laws, and wouldn’t be put into effect until sometime after that, whatever changes made will not erase the pain inflicted on a little less than half of our denomination.

Bashford United Methodist Church is a reconciling congregation, and this means that the Traditional Plan is not in accordance with the values we profess. Nor is it in accordance with the values many Conferences, including our Wisconsin Conference, continue to profess. All of the United Methodist seminaries spoke out against the plan as well. Even though the plan passed, there is continued opposition, and a formal split in the denomination seems likelier than ever.

As the Coordinator of Adult Ministries and Congregational Care, I realize this creates tremendous uneasiness in congregations. What will become of the United Methodist Church? Will there be a split? How will things be divided up if there is? These are questions we cannot answer yet. What we can take solace in, however, is that many strong advocates for compassion and hospitality in our denomination are working to provide hope and leadership during this strange time. Many Conferences and congregations will never go along with exclusive Church laws they feel are incompatible with the inclusive message of the Gospel.

If you would like some help processing the outcome of General Conference, please don’t hesitate to get in touch with me. I will be doing my best to provide hope and clarity in this time of uneasiness. The Traditional Plan is contrary to what congregational care is supposed to look like, and the emotional damage it has caused is real. If you need to process this outcome, I am here to listen. If you need to mourn the potential we had as a denomination to do ministry all together, I am here to sit with you. If you need space to wonder what the future holds, I am happy to provide honest information to the best of my ability as to what that future will be. It is important to know that Bashford United Methodist Church will continue to look out for *everyone* in our community, and we will carry this grief together. Our burdens are easier, after all, when we don’t

have to struggle alone. And please know that I have no qualms, were I to be asked, about officiating a same-gender marriage that met the criteria I would consider for any couple.

As our Gospel stories go, Jesus wasn't known for following laws he thought were unjust. He healed the sick when He wasn't supposed to, and He even touched those who were considered unclean. This was a threat to legalistic religious leaders of His time, those whose ideological purity mattered to them more than the lived experiences of real people. So...there is certainly some precedent to holy disobedience. I'm not sure if I ever expected my congregational care ministry to be anything rebellious. I actually still don't consider it as such. I just will continue to stress that *everyone* deserves care and community at Bashford, and the newly passed General Conference plan will do nothing to change that.

Whatever happens, Methodism is not going away, and God is not going away. I don't know what God is creating with us, but I do have hope for a bright future for Methodists who want an inclusive denomination.

In Christ,

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