



Affirmation

An Independent Voice for:

United Methodists for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Concerns

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Volume 44 Issue 1

Fall 2018

The Commission on a Way Forward: Where We Are **By Ben Roe, Ann Craig, and Gary Shephard, Affirmation Council** **A Quick Recap of General Conference 2016 to Now**

At General Conference 2016 in Portland the decades-long history of acrimony, parliamentary games, and confusion over the issue of homosexuality could have brought the UMC to a breaking point. The tension rose to such a level that there was concern about the physical safety of delegates and observers as well as concern for mounting talk of schism. We think most of the concerns were on the conservative side. From the progressive side it was more “how many more General Conferences will we be having this reunion?”

Bishop Bruce R. Ough, bishop of the Dakotas/Minnesota episcopal area, in a moment of personal privilege admitted that he and other members of the Council of Bishops were heart-broken at the dynamics they witnessed, even in their own council.

On Wednesday of the second week when we were expecting our “issue” to come up and likely be knotted up in Robert’s Rules folderol, delegates pleaded with the bishops to help the “hopelessly stuck” church. It apparently isn’t a matter of rights or of social justice or doing the right thing. It’s our “issue.”

The bishops asked the delegates to delay all consideration of sexuality legislation, and for permission to appoint a commission to study all areas of sexuality, clearly a euphemism for homosexuality. The delegates voted to allow this 428-405, hardly an enthusiastic endorsement, showing how deep how divisions have become on something we’ve been hoping to resolve for more than 44 years.

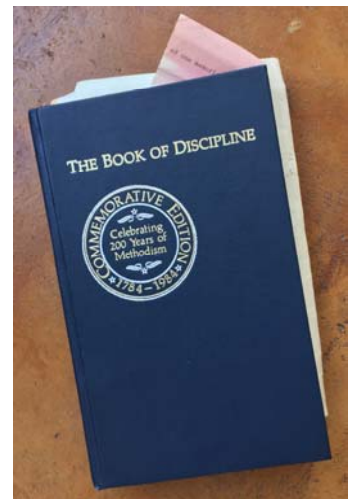
The bishops' goal for this commission was to “design a way for being a church that maximizes the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible; that allows for as much contextual differentiation as possible, and with a desire for as much unity as possible.” (Mission, Vision and Scope of the Way Forward). They appointed 32 members to the Commission on a Way Forward from four continents, including 8 bishops, 13 clergy other than bishops, 11 lay members, with 3 bishops to moderate. Three members were openly LGBTQ people.

The Commission met over a year and a half in closed meetings and in a process which was designed to give safe space for honest, heart-felt, respectful, and passionate dialogue. They initially presented two models to the bishops: one which was called the “One Church Plan” and another called the “Connectional Conference Plan (Multi-Branch, One Church)” model. The Commission did not have much support for what has been called “The Traditionalist Plan,” (a punitive model). A small group of conservative bishops pushed this model and pressured the Commission to include it in the report.

Despite the pressure, a majority of bishops support the One Church Plan.

Where We Are Now / What Plans Have Come Forward?

According to United Methodist News Service, under what the Council of Bishops calls



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the One Church Plan, decisions about whether to ordain LGBTQIA clergy would be made at the Annual Conference level. Decisions to officiate at same-gender unions would be made closer to the congregational level, most likely at the charge level, depending on who's appointed and/or the various administrative boards in the charge. The plan would remove the restrictive language against the practice of "homosexuality" in The Book of Discipline. The plan also adds assurances to pastors and conferences who in good conscience cannot perform same-sex weddings or ordain "self-avowed practicing" gay clergy that they don't have to do so. Progressives in conservative conferences or conservative charges aren't going to see much change. All conferences, including US and Central Conferences outside the US, are free to continue restrictive practices or to develop more inclusive ones. The bishops said this plan "encourages a generous unity by giving United Methodists the ability to address different missional contexts in ways that reflect their theological convictions." The "contextualization" part of this plan means continued persecutions of LGBTQIA persons in some parts of the world because it allows continued discrimination against us and provides no strong witness about our value as God's beloved creations. One of this article's authors calls this the "Least Worst Plan." It's less worse than doing nothing, but it's by no means ideal after (by GC 2019) 47 years of absolutely no progress.

The Traditionalist Plan would affirm the current language in The Book of Discipline and strengthen enforcement of the current penalties. It would show, in Affirmation's humble opinion, negative progress and nothing for 47 years of trying to make the denomination more progressive. (One of this article's authors calls this the "Worst Worst Plan.") The recent Judicial Council session ruled that this plan has significant issues. This plan will need major work to be constitutional.

The Connectional-Conference Plan (Multi-branch, One Church) would allow US conferences to choose to affiliate with one of three connectional conferences. The US Jurisdictions would go away. The connectional conferences would align based on theology: a) Unity, b) Traditional, or c) Progressive. This plan would require multiple amendments to the UM constitution. We see this as unworkable because without the eight amendments to the constitution passing, the entire plan would seem to fail. The chance of having all of the amendments pass worldwide is slim.

Where Does the National Affirmation Council Stand?

The Simple Plan, which was not considered by the recent Judicial



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Affirmation Newsletter

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Articles for consideration for publication may be submitted to:

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Mission Statement

As an independent voice of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer people, Affirmation radically reclaims the compassionate and transforming gospel of Jesus Christ by relentlessly pursuing full inclusion in the Church as we journey with the Spirit in creating God's beloved community.

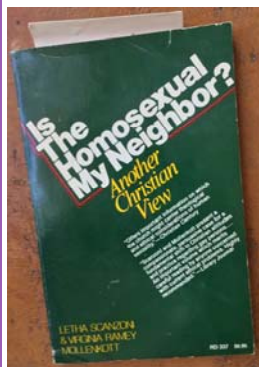
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Council meeting, is the plan that Affirmation would like to see adopted. We of Affirmation have been working for change in The UMC for almost 47 years. The Simple Plan would delete the hurtful language. This would be incredibly freeing for laity, clergy, and ministry. Yet we as Affirmation understand that the One Church Plan is getting support from Central Conferences. Each plan will be amended by GC so we will have to work to make any plan look like the Simple Plan. Regardless of the outcome, the work of Affirmation won't be over. Like the ordination of women, even today, women are not always welcome as ordained leaders. It will take generations to expand welcome and understanding throughout our churches and the world.



We will work tirelessly to help the whole church celebrate God's creative diversity in the spectrum of human sexuality, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression.

The oppressive paragraphs have been strangling the church for 46 years, and it's time for the church to be able to breathe the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit, which continues to move among LGBTQIA people of faith. We applaud the members of the United Methodist Queer Clergy Caucus both for their work on the Simple Plan and for the important leadership in the Central Conferences for the One Church Plan. Their courageous and powerful witness reminds us that God's Spirit is among us. We hope that the outcome of GC 2019 will allow the spiritual gifts of God's diverse creation to be fully expressed.

Money Drives Mission: Affirmation Financial Update

By Jim Palmquist, Treasurer

Affirmation has had another good year financially. Our donors continue to feel our passion to bring justice to the marginalized in The UMC. They continue to fund our work. The good news is many cultures are shifting dramatically our way. And it is clearly the way Jesus would have us be. Affirmation relies on volunteers to do our work, though some of it also takes money to make it happen. We are thankful for our great supporters, many of whom have been with us for decades.

Although our donors are faithful, we are facing back-to-back General Conferences and need your help. We are asking all of our donors to make an extra gift so Affirmation can drive change.

Because of your giving, Affirmation has been able to:

- * Provide upfront funds for the international hospitality event in Portland.
- * Provide support for participants at Convocation
- * Support a chaplaincy program led by LGBTQIA leaders in Uganda
- * Hold our board meeting in Indianapolis so we could be a witness for Rev. David Meredith
- * Be leaders in at least four committees of LYNC preparing for GC 2019
- * Advocate for justice in all of our respective conferences.

Here are three ways to make contributions to Affirmation.

Send a check to our PO Box. Old fashioned, but we get 100% of your donation.

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Donate through our web site <http://www.umaffirm.org/>. Use the donate button in the upper right under the black bar. This donation will be processed using PayPal and can be done with a debit or credit card.

Donate while shopping on Amazon. Sign up for Amazon Smile, and make sure you sign in to Amazon using smile.amazon.com rather than amazon.com. We should be towards the top of the list of organizations.

And you can always consider an ongoing monthly or quarterly gift. Contact me with questions or suggestions. Jim.palmquist01_at_gmail.com. (Substitute "@" for "_at_".)

The David Meredith Trial – A Kangaroo Court

By Bea Fraser-Soots, Affirmation Council

In March, members of the Affirmation National Council traveled to Indianapolis to bear witness to the meeting of the North Central Jurisdiction (NCJ) Committee on Appeals in which the work of the West Ohio Committee on Investigations was being called into question because a complainant disputed the outcome of their investigation. The gathering was tense, contentious, inhospitable, and had a clandestine feel to it.

We were in Indianapolis to support the Rev. David Meredith, his family, and members of Clifton United Methodist Church, a Reconciling Congregation where Rev. Meredith serves. And although the Jurisdictional Committee had announced an “open” meeting and had been informed about the anticipated number of Rev. Meredith’s supporters, they severely limited the space available for interested observers.

The day before the hearing, a member of Rev. Meredith’s team happened to be in the hearing room when a member of the hotel staff offered to put up more chairs because there was plenty of space before any safety concerns were raised, but the NCJ Committee had obviously limited the space for justice-seeking United Methodists.

When some of us gathered outside the meeting room to assure that a sufficient number of seats were reserved for Rev. Meredith’s family and team, Hilton Hotel security staff and a police officer showed up to disperse the quiet gathering. When the doors were finally opened to the limited number of supporters, no one was allowed to stand in that extra space.

After the NCJ Committee entered the room and was introduced, the chairperson, the Rev. Beverly Wilkes-Null of the Illinois Great Rivers Annual Conference, announced that even though there was a stenographer to record the proceedings, no electronic recording or live-streaming would be allowed. Thus, all of those who had been intentionally excluded and shunted off to another room wouldn’t be permitted to participate at all.

When several observers in the hearing room were noticed holding smart phones, Rev. Wilke-Null interrupted testimony to admonish them angrily, declaring that they were breaking a “sacred covenant”. Sadly, she didn’t seem to understand that her authoritarian dictum was neither sacred nor covenantal.

Although the NCJ Committee seemed well prepared with respect to *The Book of Discipline*, there was absolutely no reference to Holy Scripture throughout the entire procedure. Also, observers and supporters from the more



David Meredith, closing the door to the room where the trial was held.

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conservative perspective of the UMC were noticeably absent from these proceedings.

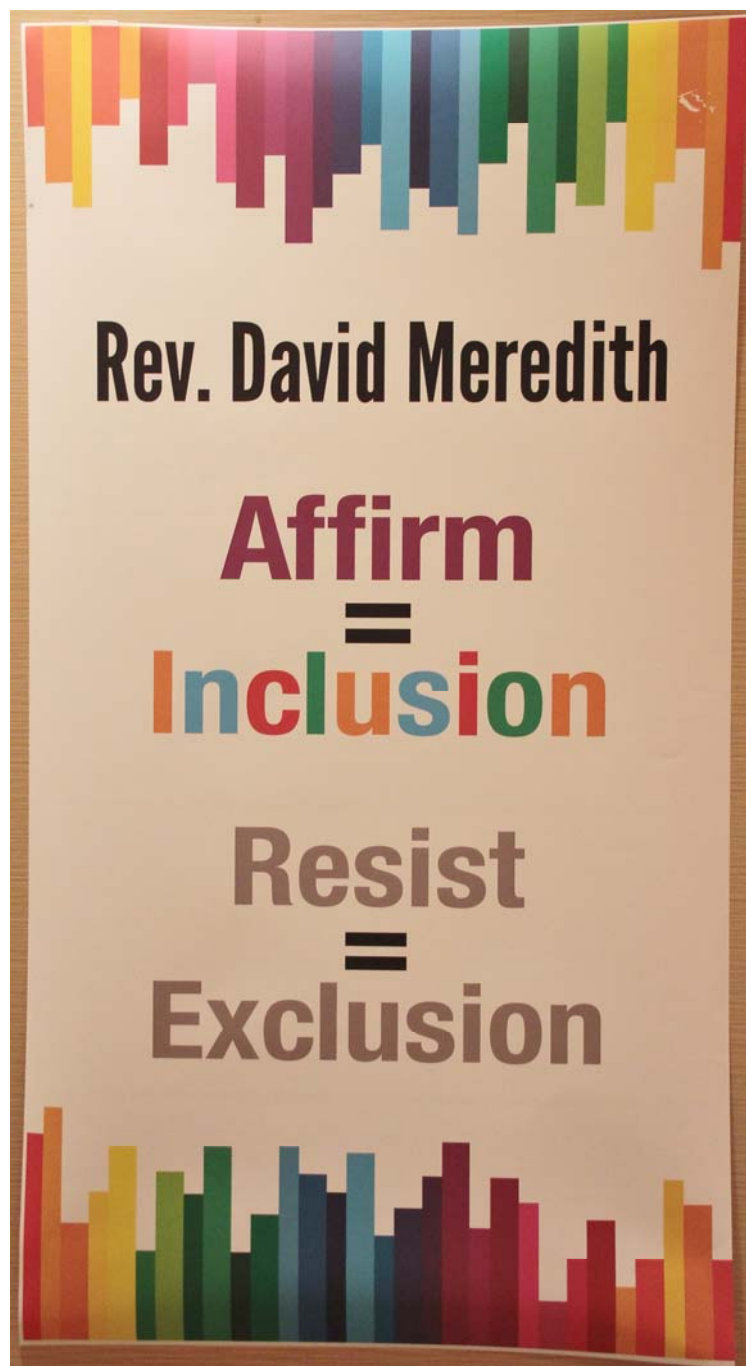
The appellant was accompanied by counsel and read from prepared remarks for his allotted 30 minutes, citing *The Book of Discipline* and various Judicial Council rulings, including the one that resulted from charges against Bishop Karen Oliveto. In that ruling, the Council declared that, of course, marriage presumed intimate sexual “practice.”

Neither Rev. Meredith or his counsel were allowed to address the committee at all. There was no counsel present for the committee, which was represented by the chairperson, who struggled to defend their deliberations and conclusion to not pursue the charge. Bishop Greg Palmer had convened the committee to investigate the complaints which were filed against Rev. Meredith. The committee deliberated extensively and returned a consensus decision which discounted most of the charges against Rev. Meredith.

The ruling of the North Central Jurisdiction (NCJ) Committee on Appeals, which was released recently, agreed with the original appellant that the Annual Conference Committee on Investigations had made errors of church law when they dismissed some of the charges against Rev. Meredith. The NCJ Committee returned the case to Annual Conference Committee. However, they asked that any further judicial proceedings be curtailed until after the Called General Conference in 2019.

This began when Rev. Meredith married his husband, Jim Schlacter, shortly before General Conference 2016. Shortly after their wedding, Bishop Palmer received a complaint against Rev. Meredith. The complaint cited not only Rev. Meredith’s same-gender wedding, but also that the wedding had taken place in a United Methodist Church.

Perhaps when the 2019 called General Conference is over, Rev. David Meredith and Jim Schlacter will receive the respect they deserve for their lives of service to the church and God’s people. We will pray and work to make it happen.



Affirmation National Council Meeting

The David Meredith Trial, Discussion on the Commission on a Way Forward, the Council of Bishops, and Everything

Since we were first founded as Gay United Methodists in 1975, then through a variety of names as we became more inclusive, we have been about the task of keeping the lives and realities of LGBTQIA persons before the church. We were first concerned about the gay male clergy who were being outed by the institution and then kicked out. Then it was gays and lesbians, as Joan Clark outed herself and then was kicked out of the Women's Division of GBGM. Over the years we have expanded our awareness and commitments to Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer persons. Our understanding of gender identity and expression continues to grow.

We'd originally planned on a different meeting locale and date, but when the David Meredith trial date and location was announced, we changed both so that the council could present to support David and his husband. (Page 4).

The overwhelming feeling around our table in Indianapolis was that we would affirm any progress we can get, kind of along the lines of "half a loaf is better than none." We realize that removing all the negative, discriminatory language from the Book of Discipline will be a huge step towards inclusion and justice, and we would support wholeheartedly any proposal that does that. (See "The Commission On A Way Forward: Where We Are" Page 1).

Removing the funding prohibition, the marriage prohibition, and the false idea that "homosexual" behavior is prohibited by scripture and tradition would be incredibly freeing for laity, clergy, educational workshops, publications, and ministry. Bishop Karen Oliveto as well as the UMQCC members are examples of the power of acting out of this new possibility.

We are not entirely focused on US concerns: We have a ministry with a group of LGBTQIA persons in Uganda who are providing support and chaplaincy to persons living with HIV and AIDS, and who are part of the Sexual Minorities Uganda organization. We feel that if the African delegates would support this change, the LGBTQIA persons in Africa will find a greater freedom to tell their stories and work for their own liberation. We feel that allowing a more honestly contextual focus of the church's work would be helpful to LGBTQIA persons around the world.

At the meeting we had news that the Commission on a Way Forward would be recommending the One Church Plan. This is the plan where the hurtful language would be removed from The Discipline. Conferences would be able to determine whether to consecrate the ordination of LGBTQIA individuals, and local charges would be able to determine whether their clergy could celebrate LGBTQIA weddings. (Since then news has broken that all three proposals discussed by the commission will be brought forward at the 2019 Called General Conference.) See "The Commission on a Way Forward: Where We Are" (Page 1).

Now we're looking at contingency plans. What do we do if the 2019 Called GC bogs down? What do we do if The Traditionalist Plan passes, meaning after 47 years of work The UMC has instead of making any small move forward, moves backwards?

What if The Connectional-Conference Plan passes, but the constitutional amendments bog down at the annual conference level? What about the additional administrative costs of this plan should it and the constitutional amendments required pass?

One thing is for certain. We need to continue working with our Love Your Neighbor Coalition (LYNC) partners and do all we can to be prepared for the Called 2019 General Conference and WCN (what comes next.)



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Love Your Neighbor Coalition Update By Ben Roe

Progressive coalitions have been growing in United Methodism since at least 1996, when Affirmation, Methodist Federation for Social Action (MFSA), and Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN) shared office space in Denver. The coalition in 2016 had six members, and now the Love Your Neighbor Coalition has 13, including Affirmation, MFSA, RMN, and ten other organizations! Our tag line is, “Bringing Voice to Those on the Margins.” The Coalition has adopted a partnership document, a statement of how the partners will be in coalition with each other. New bylaws have been adopted.

The Coalition has this as a guiding purpose: “We are United Methodists committed to the embodiment of God's love and justice within and through the people and mission of The United Methodist Church. The core of our faith is found in Jesus' response to the question ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ - to ‘love God with all our heart, soul (being) and mind’ and to ‘love neighbor as self’ (Matthew 22:36-40). These hold ancient ‘law and prophets’ together with our contemporary Book of Discipline, Social Principles, and Book of Resolutions. Our mission is to assure The United Methodist Church is fully open to the presence, love and grace of God offered to all people.”

The partnership document outlines how the partners will work together in decision-making, in presence at General Conference and in planning meetings, and in financial support and accountability. The bylaws spell out these matters in more detail.

The fiscal agent for the Coalition continues to be the MFSA, and a Memorandum of Understanding is complete clarifying the responsibilities of the parties for financial accountability.

The event planning done by Coalition partners for the LYNC Convocation held in St. Louis, July 26-29, 2018 was a big success. There were six organizations working together to plan the Convocation, with some exciting speakers, preachers, and workshops being worked out, with a major emphasis on planning for our presence at the 2019 General Conference where the recommendations of the Commission on a Way Forward will be voted on.

The next month, Aug. 24-29 was an International Listening Post. “Listening with Open Hearts: Building Bridges and Deepening Relationships.” The Coalition planned this gathering of 10 Central Conference and 30 progressive US participants for the purpose of building relationships and understanding, intentional listening, and sharing concerns across the cultural contexts of our global church. The event was “designed to move us beyond the Commission's focus to include a wider variety of issues and concerns that will open our hearts and minds to listen and learn from one another during this critical time.” The international participants were chosen, and the 30 US participants were nominated by coalition partners and chosen. The event was co-sponsored by the Oregon-Idaho Conference with financial support from an Oregon foundation. A Memorandum of Agreement was adopted, spelling out the expectations and respective responsibilities of the parties.

All of this is focused on the 2019 General Conference which will determine the “Way Forward” for our denomination, whether we will move towards greater inclusion, recognition of the marginalized, and justice in our dealings with each other, or whether we will move towards greater legalism, exclusion, and rigidity. Or whether as a denomination we agree to nothing and keep the status quo. The specific strategy of our presence at this global gathering is being discussed.

Affirmation is being asked, as are all participants, to support financially this effort. If you can, consider an additional gift this year so that we can contribute significantly to this effort. See Page 3 for ways to contribute.

Affirmation

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Central Conference and United States United Methodists Meet to Listen

Portland, OR—Thirty-seven representatives from the Central Conferences and United States of America met August 24-29 in Portland, OR to spend time listening to each other and reflecting on issues of justice affecting their contexts.

The theme of this global gathering was “Listening with Open Hearts: Building Bridges and Deepening Relationships.” The objectives were to (1) provide an opportunity to share issues and concerns related to our various contexts, especially those facing The United Methodist Church outside of the United States, (2) deepen our understanding and relationships with one another, and (3) create an environment of intentional listening.

Lay and Clergy participants came from Angola, Côte d’Ivoire, DR Congo, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Norway, Philippines, United States, and Zambia. They represent the diversity of the global United Methodist Church in terms of race, ethnicity, age, ability, gender and sexual orientation.

The text from John 4 was the focus of a multi-day Bible study led by Rev. Dr. Grace Imathiu in which Jesus took the time to listen to a Samaritan woman at the well. The discussion raised issues of equality, poverty, migration, gender and race.

The participants built heartfelt relationships across boundaries of perspectives and contexts.

In a critical time in the history of The United Methodist Church, giving participants the opportunity to share the story behind their stories create a deep understanding.

Those gathered saw the value for the church of this type of listening and committed to continue the conversation.

They call on the church to listen to each other with an open heart, recognize and respect the complexities and the similarities in their varied ministry settings.

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