



Park Avenue United Methodist Church
3400 Park Avenue
Minneapolis, MN 55407

February 28, 2019

Our Pastoral Response to the 2019 General Conference of the United Methodist Church

Dear Members and Friends of Park Avenue,

As many of you may know, the United Methodist Church held a Special General Conference this week to consider recommendations on human sexuality, specifically as they relate to denominational polity concerning same-gender marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ+ clergy. It was a highly acrimonious gathering, to say the least, one revealing a deeply divided assembly of delegates, the result of which was to affirm the church's current policies on homosexuality (that we will not perform such marriages or ordain such persons). In response to this decision and the deliberations that accompanied it, Bruce Ough, the Resident Bishop of our Dakotas-Minnesota Area Conference, issued a searingly honest response of lament. We encourage you to read this message in its entirety (<http://mnumc-email.brtaapp.com/files/bishop%20message-postgc.pdf>). These words in particular express our own sadness over this process and decision:

"My heart is heavy, discouraged and wounded. In particular, I lament the harm that has been done and will be experienced by our LGBTQ sisters and brothers. To you I say, 'You are not the problem.' You are of sacred worth. You are not the problem. Our failure to hear you, or see you, or respect you, or include you is the problem."

As we have reflected and prayed on the way this process and decision has exposed the hurt, pain and cruelty inflicted on the LGBTQ+ community by the heterosexual world and the church, we grieve that damage.

One of the parables of Jesus that has been central in our conversations with those considering membership at Park is his challenge in Matthew 9:14-17, the place where we're reminded of the two-fold responsibility of those who make up a church. For those who are new, the challenge is being able to make some compromises in order to fit with those who have been around for a while (the "shrinking patches" in the text). At the same time, Jesus issues a challenge to those of us already here—the necessity of being a "renewing wineskin," the kind of community flexible and sufficiently open to change so that when the new wine comes, we're able to accommodate and take it in—to not be so inflexible as to burst and lose such a precious gift. We tell people that there are at least two reasons why they might choose not to take the step to become members here at Park:

- If they discern that the compromise required of them to be a part of our church calls for them to be inauthentic to their core beliefs;
- if they discern that this is a place of inflexibility and an unwillingness to change. *(continued)*

As a result of this vote, we know that many—individuals, clergy, churches—are feeling compelled to leave the denomination. That said, we need you to know that we don't want people to leave Park—we want you here. And yet, we also need to reiterate, in light of the decision made at the Special General Conference, that to ask anyone to set aside who they are and what they believe in order to be in community here at Park, as defined by our denomination, is the height of insensitivity, and we do not ask that of you.

Bishop Ough is unequivocal in his response on this matter—a response that we are in agreement with—that to those who have called the plan to permit local churches to disaffiliate with the United Methodist Church a “gracious exit plan” is anything but gracious: “It is not the United Methodist Way to invite or encourage people who are earnestly in love with God and seeking to follow Jesus to find or form another church home because they disagree over one matter of Biblical interpretation or practice of ministry.” Yet that is happening. And had the outcome of the Special General Conference been different, many would still feel compelled to leave. So, we would ask, what's the point? If some will leave or distance themselves either way, then why bother with action steps or prayer for a different outcome? It's because to do so is not about changing “them” or changing someone else's mind; it's about changing us—about acknowledging that our actions carry consequences—changing us as individuals, as a congregation, a denomination, as the followers of Jesus. And the question we need to be asking—the central question—both of ourselves and of our church, is, “Do we want to be changed?”

With respect to what's next, we know that this process is not finished—that there remains much work to be done. To that end, we will continue to pray, gather with our Bishop and clergy colleagues on Monday, March 11th to seek additional discernment, and subsequently schedule a time for our congregation to come together to process this decision as a church.

“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.” ~ 2 Corinthians, 4:7-10

Yours in Jesus,



Reverend Dr. Will Healy



Reverend Jia Starr Brown