

For Immediate Release

Church Family Matters of the Heart

By Brandon Austin, M.Div., Psy. D.

If “Justice too long delayed is justice denied,” as MLK, jr. once wrote in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, then my LGBTQIA siblings have been living with injustice for as long as the church has existed – even longer than that in other contexts, truth be told. Hope for a just change in our “brand” of Christianity arrived with the merger of the two faith traditions that created the United Methodist Church in April 1968 – symbolized by two tongues of flame beside a cross. That hope has evolved, developed, and strengthened LGBTQIA inclusion and participation in many of our congregations, especially on the West Coast, in New England states, and in most urban populations throughout the United States. Even the majority of the graduate schools who educate our pastors are inclusive! There are rural, urban, and academic exceptions, but they are few.

We of the Davis United Methodist Church have cherished our LGBTQIA siblings for decades! And today, we remain a faith community that welcomes, affirms, and advocates for our queer siblings, friends, families, and neighbors! Many readers know our robust social justice ministries connect us with our interfaith family through the Celebration of Abraham and with other justice agencies in Davis, Yolo County, and beyond who seek to provide material support to disaster survivors, refugees, asylum seekers, the houseless, the earth, and many more.

Sadly, our international church “brand” took an austere turn this week. Specifically, on February 26, 2019 at roughly 2:56 PM (PST) a Special General Conference of the United Methodist Church with representative delegates from around the world meeting in St. Louis, Missouri voted by simple majority to make permanent language in our bylaws that state that LGBTQIA persons may not be clergy and may not be married in any of our churches or by any of our clergy (438 – 384; or 53.28% Yes/46.72 No). More than that, subsequent voting at the conference enforced the rules so as to oust any current or future clergy of any rank of the church from ordaining or marrying our queer siblings.

Our Davis UMC congregation experiences this decision as graceless, demeaning, dehumanizing, demoralizing, dismissive, humiliating, faithless, and idolatrous. In this, as is too often the case, the Christian Bible has been weaponized to exclude and divide siblings of faith from one another! Ironically, those with progressive views had made room and included clergy with more “traditional” and conservative theologies in our clergy ranks. Now, evident by their legislative action this week, it is clear that they are unwilling to reciprocate.

Yet, even in this strange exile hope remains. First, context is meaningful. Since the infamous vote on Tuesday, I have learned that two thirds of the votes affirming LGBTQIA inclusion were from delegates in the United States. In other words, delegates outside the U.S. provided the bulk of votes countering inclusion; most every church presents differently in our

U.S. context than abroad. Secondly, United Methodist churches and leadership previously more inclusive are determined to remain inclusive – that is absolutely true of the Davis UMC congregation! Thirdly, we are not alone. By far, most United Methodist clergy and churches in the West and throughout much of the U.S. remain committed to the inclusion of our LGBTQIA siblings and to loving, faithful service and social justice causes that have been our hallmark. Finally, I would simply add that being part of a faith community, or even of an HOA for that matter, is not for the faint of heart. In a week like this, it can be hell. But, when it goes well, and with a heart ready to welcome it, well, it's heaven on earth!

As regards those who have voted to exclude me and my LGBTQIA siblings out of church, I would ask them only to consider more seriously Jesus' command to love others as he did. Failing to do so is to risk splitting their own and our collective soul and well-being. Or, as Alexandr Solzhenitsyn once wrote: *"If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"* -- "The Gulag Archipelago". Book by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 1973. https://www.azquotes.com/author/13869-Aleksandr_Solzhenitsyn

Prayerfully Submitted,

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