



6 January 2016

An Open Letter to the African Bishops of The United Methodist Church
from the Love Your Neighbor Coalition

Grace and hope to you during this season of Epiphany as together we celebrate the revelation of God's saving presence and commit ourselves anew to the sacred work of doing justice and making peace.

We are writing in response to the statement issued by the African College of Bishops of The United Methodist Church at their meeting of 7-11 September 2015 in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe. Their words come to us as a mixture of both blessing and curse. Even as they inspire hope on some fronts, they deepen our despair on others. That is why we have discerned a profound need to respond.

It is not our goal to deepen the divisions that threaten to splinter our United Methodist Church. We do not believe that schism is in anyone's best interest. Rather than facilitating the church's crucial work of preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, liberating the oppressed, and proclaiming the year of God's favor (Luke 4:18-19; Isaiah 61:1-2), schism engages us in internecine battles that threaten to make us irrelevant as a witness to the reality of God's love for our *whole* world (John 3:16). In this regard, we agree with the College of African Bishops when they assert that there are "important issues that unite us," and that we, as a church, "are called to be in solidarity with people who suffer as a result of unjust political systems, wars, famine, poverty, natural disasters, diseases, illiteracy, etc." We commit ourselves to pray and work for a church that can indeed be unified around these crucial matters that affect the lives of far too many of God's children around our world.

We also join the Bishops in their condemnation of the atrocities that have been and continue to be perpetrated as a result of "the ongoing bloody and brutal civil war in Syria, the ISIS insurgency across parts of Europe, as well as the Boko Haram and Al-Shabab insurgencies in parts of Africa." We recognize that international terrorism has helped to fuel human rights crises of untold proportions that must be addressed by the church with courage, resourcefulness, and commitment. We cannot stand idly by as thousands of families are made homeless and turned into refugees, as women and children are raped and enslaved, as innocent civilians are intentionally slaughtered or caught in the crossfire of warring factions, as children are denied access to education, and as the diseases of war and poverty take a terrible toll on whole populations of God's people. As "God's messengers of peace and reconciliation," we must engage our world leaders to do what is necessary to make real peace – not just to bring about a begrudging cessation of hostilities, but to create communities of safety and abundance where all can thrive. To this end, we applaud the Bishops' call to engage in authentic dialogue with grassroots movements of ordinary citizens, including young people and women, as well as community and political leaders.

The issue of global terrorism is not just about disaffected people engaging in horrible and terrifying acts to advance particular agendas or ideologies. There is more involved in global terrorism than just "radical Islam." As the African Bishops rightly point out in their statement, Global terrorism is but one response to "unjust political systems and the manipulation of weaker nations by world powers." We join with the Bishops in urging The United Methodist Church to pay real attention to "the stark realities of needless suffering and pain in our world" not merely by raising voices of lament but by bringing together our best

minds, engaging our most fervent prayers, and utilizing our significant resources “to usher in God’s reign of peace, justice and freedom to all.” These issues must not be pushed to the sidelines of the work that we do together as church, particularly during the 2016 General Conference, but must take center focus as we pray and conference together about how best to be God’s people and to do God’s will in our world.

Having discerned these points of commonality in our witness for the gospel of Jesus Christ, we must nevertheless take issue with the College of African Bishops’ analysis of our ongoing conflict in the church about marriage and sexuality. We do not believe that our ongoing work around these issues can be sidelined while the church focuses on other issues of global importance. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has so eloquently stated in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

We understand that our disagreements around issues of human sexuality have, for several decades, tended to monopolize the church’s attention during General Conferences and other international gatherings. These issues have divided us into warring camps and have threatened us with the specter of schism. We do not believe that God is calling us to split the church apart. We apologize for the times when our actions have perpetuated an “us vs. them” mentality.

Nevertheless, we must insist that peace is not going to come through ignoring the demands of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians for full inclusion in the church. We will not heal our church’s divisions by ignoring the need for women to have control over the reproductive capacities of their own bodies through the use of family planning tools such as birth control and abortion. Unity will not be found in silence. Nor will silence change the realities of the multiple structures that already exist in family life. We are longing for our church to talk honestly about human sexuality and the realities of family life. Not only do we need to address the growing reality of same-sex marriage, but we also need to address concerns around polygamy, the sexual exploitation of children and the sexual violence of subjugation faced by so many women and young girls. We are bringing these issues into the light because we believe that being united is worth being uncomfortable during tough conversations. Even our Methodist founders disagreed sometimes. Points of theological conflict should open our hearts to the fact that God is bigger and more complicated than any of us can imagine.

To work toward a goal of honest holy conferencing and not forced conformity, we insist that the final word has not been spoken about the teachings of Scripture on human sexuality. A whole literature exists that takes the Scriptures seriously, sets them into their appropriate historical context, and seeks to draw guidance for our current understanding of sex and sexuality. This literature belies the claim that Scripture issues a clear and unequivocal denunciation of sexual practices and institutions that do not fit the norm of marriage between one man and one woman. We consequently contend that *The Book of Discipline*’s claim that “sexual relations are affirmed only within the covenant bond of a faithful, monogamous, heterosexual marriage” creates a moral dilemma in United Methodism. A dilemma, because faithful United Methodists believe this pronouncement and subsequent church policies and practices to be unjust; and, denying the right of those who believe it is their faithful duty, “under the constraint of conscience and, after having exhausted all legal recourse, to resist or disobey laws that they deem to be unjust or that are discriminately enforced” (BOD ¶ 164.F). This dilemma is the result of creating a state of hypocrisy in the United Methodist Church within our own Book of Discipline.

We further deny the Bishops’ allegation that sexual relations are not affirmed “within same-sex unions-or polygamy.” Not only are these completely separate issues, but this is harmful and offensive language;

reminiscent of the past efforts to demonize homosexual persons by equating homosexuality with pedophilia.

It is beyond doubt that *The Book of Discipline* is a work in progress that provides guidance for the people called United Methodist, but in no way can it be taken as the final definitive word on this or any other matter. That is why we, as a church, gather every four years in General Conference to review it and amend it.

The real issue that confronts us in our battles about human sexuality is not the existence of diversity in belief and practice, but the mean-spirited way that those who advocate for change in the church's traditional position have been treated. Rather than listening to our testimony and engaging us in prayerful dialogue that honestly seeks to discern God's will on matters of human sexuality, there are those in the church who have attacked us, demonized us, humiliated us, and all too often ignored us. Herein lies the problem! The real threat to unity in our denomination does not come from faithful Christians who are calling the church to reconsider its traditional stands on human sexuality, but from those who refuse to engage in honest, respectful, humble, and prayerful dialogue, including those who stand at microphones during the General Conference and use words that are both hateful and untrue against those with whom they disagree.

Our testimony is this: We have seen God at work powerfully, inspirationally and miraculously in the lives of people who do not fit within traditional heterosexual norms. In the lives and ministries of these people, we experience the fruit of the Spirit, which is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (Galatians 5:22-23) Some of these people are Spirit-filled leaders in our denominational movements to establish justice and peace around our world. We join with the apostle Peter in recognizing that the work of the Spirit trumps our historical assumptions about what must be true because it has always been assumed to be true. (Acts 10:47) It is the Spirit who must give us guidance in these matters, and we will do well to trust that the Spirit is leading us in ways that are true. Let us be reminded of Gamaliel's prescient warning to his colleagues on the Jerusalem Sanhedrin: "I tell you, keep away from these people and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!" (Acts 5:38-39)

There is much in the world that demands the church's attention and our prophetic action. It is tragic that we find ourselves incapable of doing what must be done to do justice and make peace because of our divisions around issues of human sexuality. And yet, we cannot simply ignore these divisions. The church must do the hard work of discerning God's will. It must engage in conferencing that is truly holy... conferencing that is actually open to the ongoing movement of God's Spirit. While we may find that we still disagree, we may find a way to recognize each as fellow travelers in the way of Jesus who together find unity in grace rather than law, compassion rather than hatred, and love rather than fear.

The members of the Love Your Neighbor Coalition Leadership Team, representing thirteen United Methodist caucus organizations, respectfully await your willingness to work together on all of the issues that are facing our denomination and world! To the Glory of God and out of our deep and abiding love for Jesus, the Christ!

1. The Rev. Walter Lockhart, Affirmation: United Methodists for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Concerns
2. The Rev. Cedrick Bridgeforth, Black Methodists for Church Renewal (BMCR)

3. Deborah Dangerfield, Black Methodists for Church Renewal (BMCR)
4. Jenny Phillips, Fossil Free UMC
5. The Rev. Amy DeLong, Love Prevails
6. The Rev. Lyssette Perez, MARCHA: Metodistas Asociados Representando la Causa de los Hispano-Americanos
7. Chett Pritchett, Methodist Federation for Social Action (MFSA)
8. Jayson Dobney, Methodists In New Directions (MIND)
9. The Rev. Sara Thompson Tweedy, Methodists In New Directions (MIND)
10. The Rev. Dr. Jacob Dharmaraj, National Federation of Asian American United Methodists (NFAAUM)
11. Cynthia Kent, Native American International Caucus of United Methodists (NAIC)
12. Monalisa Tuitahi, Pacific Islanders Caucus of United Methodists (PINCUM)
13. Bridget Cabrera, Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN)
14. The Rev. Janine Delaunay, United Methodist Association of Ministers with Disabilities
15. The Rev. Frank Wulf, Western Methodist Justice Movement (WMJM)
16. The Rev. Richard Bentley, Western Methodist Justice Movement (WMJM)
17. The Rev. Steven Clunn, Love Your Neighbor Coalition Coordinator (LYNC)