

To Plead the Cause[©]

Reconciling Ministries and United Methodism

“A man of catholic spirit...having unspeakable tenderness for their persons, and longing for their welfare, does not cease to commend them to God in prayer, and to plead their cause....”


--John Wesley



A theological study paper of the Reconciling Ministries Network in the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference

ABSTRACT. We call for reconsideration of the General Conference legislation which, since 1972, has targeted homosexuality. We outline nine common misconceptions about homosexuality which have led the General Conference into three fundamental errors, resulting in its theological heresy, moral sin and denominational apostasy. We offer positions counter to those of the General Conference to provide theological grounding for our members, and to initiate church-wide discussion and dialogue. Our critique views the doctrines of Creation, Reconciliation and Redemption in the light of Jesus’ teaching, John Wesley’s writing, and *The Discipline’s* historic affirmations. We of the Reconciling Ministries Network in the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference adopted this as our official position March 17, 2001, and encourage reading and study by United Methodists across the conference and the denomination.

EDITORIAL NOTES

- 1) This paper was initiated by the Reconciling Ministries Network in the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference. It was written by the Rev. Paul J. Beeman, member of the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference, twice a member of The General Conference, active in the national and annual conference Reconciling Ministries Network, and immediate past national president of PFLAG—Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. It was edited and adopted as the official position of the Reconciling Ministries Network in the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference, and is commended to our churches for study. Marilyn Alexander, executive director of the national Reconciling Ministries Network, explains that, in consideration of the wide diversity of opinions within the movement, the national board encourages regional groups in endeavors such as this paper represents but “does not present position papers (which speak) for the movement.” 
- 2) This paper deals with issues of homosexuality, and the broader range of sexual orientation and gender identity. Younger persons tend to use “queer community” as an all-inclusive term. In this paper we choose the acronym “l/g/b/t/q,” which stands for persons who may be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered or who may be questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- 3) The quotations from John Wesley are from his sermon, “A Catholic Spirit,” 1872 text.
- 4) Quotations from *The Book of Discipline* are from the 2000 edition with paragraphs (¶) noted.
- 5) Quotations under “Our Mission” headings are from the mission statement of the Reconciling Ministries Network in the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference.



PROLOGUE

The opening quotation from Wesley's sermon is appealing but perhaps misleading. The topic of this paper is not alone "their cause." Our organization is inclusive of heterosexual and homosexual United Methodists. *Our* cause is justice for all. Through this document we seek to advance our interaction with those who support the General Conference position on homosexuality, to encourage reconciliation, and to foster dialogue. At the same time, we strive to be clear and concise in defining the errors we see in the General Conference position.

We recognize that, in the intersecting areas of sexuality and faith, beliefs are varied and divisions run deep. Careful definitions are required and precise distinctions are needed. As Stanley Kurtz, of the Hudson Institute, wrote in another context, "We're balancing difficult and cross-cutting goods and interests here."

The General Conference has declared that "practice of homosexuality...incompatible with Christian teaching" (? 161.G). Many United Methodists ask: How can they claim that homosexual practice is incompatible with Christian teaching? Do any actual teachings either confirm or deny that claim? More to the point, since we believe that homosexuality and Christian teaching are actually compatible, what historic teachings can we point to which show their compatibility? How can we open dialogue?

In response, through this paper we in the Pacific Northwest examine nine common misconceptions about homosexuality in light of contemporary scholarship. These misconceptions have led the General Conference into three fundamental errors, resulting in theological heresy, moral sin and denominational apostasy. We interpret these to be errors in the light of the teachings of Jesus, John Wesley, and the United Methodist *Book of Discipline's* historic affirmations.

I. OUR NEED FOR RECONCILIATION

Through our study we have come to a more sympathetic understanding of the depths of feeling over issues which divided the New Testament Church, as well as those which divide our church today. Certainly the bitterest and most influential argument in the two-millennium history of the Christian Church was whether gentiles could become Christians, and if so, whether they must first become Jews and undergo the physical change of circumcision.



The bitterest and perhaps the most influential argument in The United Methodist Church at the opening of the Third Millennium is whether lesbian and gay persons can be Christians, and if so, whether they must first become heterosexuals and exhibit the appropriate behavioral change, or at least become celibate.

NEW TESTAMENT DIVISION

Jewish Christians of First Century Jerusalem were grieving over a series of severe losses. Judaism had lost its center of worship when Solomon's Temple was destroyed. The replacement had little of the grandeur and power of the original. To substitute for the Temple, some leaders, especially in the Diaspora far from Jerusalem, were beginning to seize on the Torah as the object of their adoration and focus of worship. The Roman Empire had stripped their nation of its sovereignty. Then, as followers of the new Messiah Jesus, who were still fully Jewish, the very symbol of their identity was being questioned. However bitter their other losses, they were determined that they would cling to their one remaining physical symbol of their faithfulness as God's Chosen People, the constant and indisputable sign, circumcision.

When Greek converts complained about requirements of also becoming Jewish and being circumcised, Jewish-Christian leaders in the Diaspora allowed them to be converted and baptized

without requiring it. But the Jerusalem faithful found such libertine permissiveness too much to tolerate. Too many of their sacred traditions already had been given up to contemporary society.

But three events forced reconsideration by the Jerusalem Jewish-Christians. The Apostle Philip, whom they loved and respected, had converted and baptized an Ethiopian Eunuch—a foreigner and member of a sexual minority—with no apparent mention of circumcision (Acts 8:26-40). Peter had been instructed that “what God has made clean you must not call profane” (Acts 10:9-16). And in addition, the conversion of uncircumcised gentiles was outpacing the conversion of Jews to Christianity. The Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem feared they might soon be outnumbered.

Granted, the Jerusalem Christians believed in conversion by faith in Jesus and by the unearned grace of God. Yet for them, those intangibles—*faith* and *grace*—felt too nebulous and insubstantial, not physical enough to demonstrate one’s commitment. Although baptism was a physical act for converts to undergo, its mark on a Christian was invisible. They wanted converts first to become like themselves. To allow them to forego circumcision was to abandon one of the last physical vestiges of their identity as God’s Chosen People.

CONTEMPORARY DIVISION

The New Testament controversy over circumcision can be instructive as United Methodists approach homosexuality today. We understand why some United Methodists feel that sacred traditions are being lost, that others already seem beyond recovery, that commitments they have long held are being questioned, and that they honestly fear those persons whose affection is expressed differently from their own. They want others to become like themselves before claiming Christian discipleship.

We know that these fears are real within the conservative heart of The United Methodist Church regarding l/g/b/t/q persons. We acknowledge the good faith of those who hold their beliefs as a sacred trust, and who conscientiously oppose acceptance of homosexuality within the church. They have their own reasons for clinging to their convictions. We must present ours.

NINE MISCONCEPTIONS

Some of us as Christian disciples, heterosexuals and homosexuals alike, have chosen singleness. Others of us seek to build the permanent stability of a Christian family. Together we reject any limitation of membership rights unique to homosexual persons, and affirm the recognition and acceptance of l/g/b/t/q persons, and of their/our personal and corporate commitments, as legitimate and welcome within The United Methodist Church, as well as society as a whole.¹

To that end, it is important that we all acknowledge that varieties of belief regarding homosexuality coexist within our church. In a large denomination with traditions like ours, that is both inevitable and fitting. Our critique of the General Conference legislation rests in part upon our own understanding of the nature of homosexuality. We therefore begin by seeking to correct nine misconceptions and to interpret our beliefs.

1. Some devoted Christians claim to be bound by every directive in the Bible, and therefore truly believe that the Bible condemns homosexuality as a sin for us today. We respectfully disagree. As New Testament Scholar Walter Wink points out, “Many of the practices that the Bible prohibits, we allow, and many that it allows, we prohibit.... Christians reserve the right to pick and choose which (biblical) sexual mores they will observe, though they seldom admit doing just that. And this is as true of evangelicals and fundamentalists as it is of liberals and mainliners.”² Wink concludes, “Our moral task...is to apply Jesus’ love ethic to whatever sexual mores are prevalent in a given culture, ...(and) to be critiqued by Jesus’ love commandment.” Other New Testament scholars agree.³



2. Prior to the 1880s, it was generally believed that all people were heterosexual by nature,⁴ and any homoerotic behavior was seen as aberrant and deliberately immoral. Today most authorities on human behavior⁵ and on morality⁶ understand same-gender attraction to be one variety of human love, fully as

natural and potentially as moral as heterosexual attraction and behavior. We believe The United Methodist Church must, and eventually will, join other Christians in understanding God's creation in this way.

3. Some Christians continue to claim that homosexuality is a personal choice, and thus that homosexuality itself is a sinfully rebellious personal decision. We disagree. In concert with most scientific consensus today, we understand homosexuality most often, although not always, to be an innate state of sexual orientation.⁷ It is no more often a choice than heterosexuality is a choice for the vast majority of heterosexuals.

4. Some well-meaning but misguided Christians point to a discredited method called "Conversion Therapy" or "Reparative Therapy," which they claim can change any l/g/b/t/q persons into heterosexuals. Certainly those whom *The Discipline* calls "former homosexuals," who try to change their behavior, should not experience "coercion and marginalization" (? 162.H). While no long-term studies have been conducted, some advocates do appear successful in altering their sexual behavior. But only a tiny portion of gay men or lesbians are willing to attempt such a change, even temporarily. For most who try, the method is ultimately unsuccessful; for many, it proves disastrously destructive.⁸ Since homosexuality is neither an illness nor an abnormality, but usually an innate condition, even the Roman Catholic Church has acknowledged it is not amenable to change.⁹

5. Some believe it is only the *expression* of homosexual intimacy that is sinful. They condemn it, not only for "single" persons, but even within a monogamous lifetime commitment by Christians. Again, we respectfully disagree. We believe that one's sexual *orientation* is morally neutral,¹⁰ whether heterosexual or homosexual, in the words of the Social Principles, "*God's good gift*," which can be expressed in ways that may be either mutually fulfilling or destructive.

6. Traditional Christian disciplinarians tend to restrict all sexual activity to monogamous marriage of a man and a woman. This puts homosexual Christians in a double bind. They are prevented from marrying, then accused of promiscuity, and even blamed as a menace to "traditional family values." It seems to be the culture's emphasis on the freedom of sexual pleasure for its own sake that is destabilizing family values. But most data point to heterosexual, not homosexual, behavior as the critical factor.¹¹

7. We believe that all Christians should be held to similar moral and ethical standards. But like our society, the General Conference has established a double standard—one for heterosexual couples, and a very different one for homosexuals. This is both unreasonable and unjust. We believe with Charles Hefling, that "same-sex relationships (hold) the same potential for sacramental meaning and power" as heterosexual relationships.¹² As long as two homosexual persons are prohibited from marriage, their fidelity within a committed relationship should be welcomed and blessed by the church as positively as heterosexual fidelity within marriage.



8. We also recognize that there may always be some Christians who believe sincerely that homosexuality is sinful, and hold that their position is non-negotiable. That is their privilege, just as it is ours to come to a different conclusion. But United Methodists have a tradition of inclusiveness. We have the ability to disagree peaceably and lovingly on many issues.¹³ We believe that all of us can and should make our home in the same church, and that the conviction of one portion of our faith community should not be codified into a church law that discriminates against another equally committed portion.

9. It is often pointed out that our denomination might at first pay some price in loss of membership and income by welcoming l/g/b/t/q persons as full equals. We must point out that the church has experienced a tremendous, though largely silent and unacknowledged, loss of participation and donations of members who are themselves l/g/b/t/q, plus the loss of many of their families and advocates as well. The General Conference has clearly chosen which members it prefers to lose—a choice we believe is based on personal sentiment, political expediency and institutional protectionism,

rather than theological reasoning and faithfulness to the gospel.

As a part of the larger Reconciling Ministries Network, we in the Pacific Northwest have sought to articulate our understanding of homosexuality as a prelude to our evaluation of General Conference legislation. However, we affirm our commitment to a diverse church, one as diverse as those who responded to Jesus during his lifetime, and as diverse as the Jewish and Greek Christians of the New Testament Church. Such a Christian community must include those contemporary disciples of Jesus who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and questioning.

As United Methodists, we must be able and willing to study these topics together and dialogue about them. Yet that hope remains elusive. Many United Methodists and many General Conference members, perhaps even a majority, seem confused, unclear and embarrassed, only wishing the matter would go away. It won't. Therefore we invite all United Methodists to revisit these issues with prayer, study and willingness to discuss and to reconsider all aspects.



Footnotes to I. OUR NEED FOR RECONCILIATION

¹ For an authoritative presentation of medical, educational and social understanding of homosexuality, see *Just the Facts about Sexual Orientation and Youth: a Primer for Principals, Educators and School Personnel*, mailed to every school administrator and principal in the U. S. in 2000, published and endorsed by the following, with official statements from each: the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Counseling Association, American Association of School Administrators, American Federation of Teachers, American Psychological Association, American School Health Association, Interfaith Alliance Foundation, National Association of School Psychologists, National Association of Social Workers, National Education Association. Copies may be downloaded from the website of PFLAG.org, or may still be available in print from the NEA.

² Walter Wink, *Homosexuality and the Bible*, original pamphlet sold through Fellowship Bookstore, Nyack, NY, 1996, with permission to copy. pp. 7-8. Other versions are also published in *Christian Century* and other places.

³ See also: Bernadette J. Broonen, in *Immaculate and Powerful: the Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality*, ed. C. W. Atkinson et al., Harvard Women's Studies in Religion Series (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985); L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990); Victor Paul Furnish, *The Moral Teachings of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986); Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

⁴ Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), pp.39-41: "(It was) 1869 when a German legal reformer seeking to change antisodomy laws first publicly used the word *homosexuality*.... In 1880 the word *heterosexual* made its public debut [in Germany] in a work defending homosexuality." The English translation of Kraft-Ebing, R. V., came in 1889, *Psychopathia sexualis, with especial reference to contrary sexual instinct: A medico-legal study* (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.269: "Much of contemporary biological, psychological, and anthropological research uses homosexuality as real or natural categories. Some examples include Whitman, Bailey and Pillard, and Buhrich."

⁶ Current commentary on the morality of homosexuality often roots in the work of James B. Nelson, associated with the Program in Human Sexuality, University of Minnesota Medical School and professor of Christian Ethics, Union Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. In *A Guide to Psychotherapy with Gay and Lesbian Clients*, John C. Gonsiorek, ed. (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1982), p. 169, Nelson writes, "Homosexuality is...as natural and as fundamental to identity as is the color of the skin. It is both naïve and cruel to tell a lesbian or gay man, Your sexual orientation is still unnatural and a perversion."

⁷ The American Psychological Association's official pamphlet, "Answers to Your Questions about Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality," (750 1st St. NE, Washington, DC 20002-4242) provides questions and answers. "Is sexual orientation a choice? No, human beings cannot choose to be either gay or straight. Sexual orientation emerges for most people in early adolescence without any prior sexual experience."

⁸ *Ibid.*, "Can therapy change sexual orientation? No. The reality is that homosexuality is not an illness. It does not require treatment and is not changeable.... The American Psychological Association is concerned about such therapies and their potential harm to patients. ... Any person who enters into therapy...has a right to expect that such therapy would take place in a professionally neutral environment absent of any social bias." Also issuing statements opposing attempts at conversion therapy are the American Psychiatric Association, the National Association of Social Workers, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Association of School Psychologists. See also Footnote 1.

⁹ Father Gregory Baum, "Catholic Homosexuals," in *Commonweal*, 1974, 99(19), writes that what is normative for "normal life" is the human nature toward which we are divinely summoned—the life of mutuality, in terms of which homosexual love is not to be excluded or seen as contradictory." In a newsletter from his diocese, Catholic Bishop Norbert Dorsey, Orlando, published his homily of Jan. 26, 1997: "As far back as 1986, a document of our Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith stated, '...the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin.' Our Catholic Catechism in 1994 states (of

homosexuals), ‘they do not choose their homosexual condition.’”

¹⁰ Op cit., Nelson writes, “Homosexuality is a Christianly valid orientation... (and) should be guided by the same general ethical criteria as are appropriate for heterosexual expression” (p.164). For a brief history of biblical and theological interpretation of homosexuality, the church and morality, see also Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1996), pp. 144-172. For an extensive treatment, see John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

¹¹ The National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, conducts a study of marriage annually. See its 2001 on-line report at http://marriage.rutgers.edu/state_of_our_unions. It expresses the belief that destabilization of families and a threat to marriage is inherent in the culture’s emphasis in dating on sexual activity for its own sake, rather than on courtship as a step toward marriage, calling it “sex without strings, marriage without rings.” The report estimates that just under 50% of marriages in 2000 are projected to end in divorce, down from the estimated 60% in 1980. *JAMA*, the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, reports are found on line at www.ama-assn.org/std/newslines/special/mm4736, as are those of the U S Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s MMWR. Statistics are from Vol. 47, No. 36, “Risk Behavior among High School Students.” It reports that, of teenagers graduating from high school in 1997, 60.9% had experienced sexual intercourse; 46.0% were sexually active, both a decrease since 1991.

¹² Charles Hefling, from his essay, “By Their Fruits: A Traditionalist Argument,” in Hefling, ed., *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God* (Boston: Cowley, 1996), 17 essays by leading Anglicans, a useful study guide for groups and seminars.

¹³ On issues outlined in the Social Principles (? 160-166), such as ecology, rights of women, population control and abortion, alcohol and tobacco, collective bargaining, military service and pacifism, United Methodists coexist peaceably while often deeply divided.

II. OUR FOUNDATION DOCTRINES

Biblically speaking, those of us who support a diverse denomination and have chosen to remain within The United Methodist Church, now form a *remnant* (Isaiah 10:20 et al.). We are but a mere representation of our former rich diversity. Yet we are a faithful and significant remnant committed to restoring the wholeness of the Church.



Based on our statements in the foregoing section, we have chosen our words in the following section with thoughtfulness and precision. Some among us have said our statements do not go far enough in condemning the General Conference’s anti-homosexual legislation. Others feel they go too far, or that our language may seem inflammatory, or that it leaves too little room for dialogue. Our choice of language is in no way intended to inflame or anger those who may disagree with our position. Rather this is our attempt to be precise about our theological understanding, to offer constructive next steps, and to open areas for church-wide discussion.

As Reconciling United Methodists and as a Reconciling Ministries Network in the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference, our approach to our mission springs from our understanding of three basic doctrines of the faith:

- 1) The doctrine of Creation—the creation of the individual and the re-creation of the person in Christ;
- 2) The doctrine of Reconciliation—the healing and restoring of relationships, both of persons with persons and of persons with God; and
- 3) The doctrine of Redemption—the redemption of the individual, of the Church and of societal structures.

The mission statement of the national Reconciling Ministries Network explains our cause.

The United Methodist *Book of Discipline* states that God’s grace is available to all and commits us to be in ministry with all persons. However, in principle and practice, The United Methodist Church excludes some people, particularly lesbians, gay and bisexual persons, from full participation in its life and work.

The result is a Body of Christ that is broken and incomplete and that often acts in unjust ways. The Reconciling Ministries Network exists to be a healing voice within this climate of fear, ignorance, intolerance and injustice. The program encourages and equips individuals, congregations, campus ministries, and church bodies to be instruments of justice within the church by inviting all persons to be full participants in the life of the church, both in policy and practice. In this endeavor, the program provides a supportive network, educational and worship resources, and strategies that enable and empower individuals and church organizations for Christian ministries with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered persons. (www.rcp.org/mission.html)

As we will show, we interpret the General Conference's steadily regressive anti-homosexual legislation to be unfaithful to the teachings of Jesus, inconsistent with Christian theology, inappropriate to our United Methodist polity, and dysfunctional in our practice as Christian disciples.

First, we believe that the doctrine of Creation--the creation of the individual and the transforming re-creation of the individual in Christ--underlies all else in the church's life and ministry; that l/g/b/t/q Christians are created physically and morally equal in every way with heterosexuals; and that they must be recognized as equal members within the church. Not to do so is to deny our statements of faith and becomes heresy.



Jesus - The all-welcoming, informing and healing voice of Jesus expresses and interprets God's creative purpose toward humankind. He taught that the status in which one is created and lives does not disqualify one for the Creator's accepting love. The Gospel of John presents his inclusive mission most succinctly in two verses. One is the beloved John 3:16, his affirmation "*that everyone who (whosoever) believes in him*" may have eternal life.

In the second, John 1:17 (NRSV) further notes Jesus' distinction between human law and God's welcoming grace, saying: "The law indeed was given through Moses; **grace** and truth through Jesus Christ. It is God, the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." Thus, we believe it inappropriate for the church legalistically to condemn what Jesus did not, and equally inappropriate not to welcome the type of marginalized persons whom he graciously welcomed.

The God known in Jesus presents one central, non-judgmental requirement: "*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you*" (John 15:12-17).

Jesus' expressions of love became a direct challenge to the religious establishment of his day, deliberately breaking down their restrictions and personally welcoming those outcast by synagogue leaders. He expressed a welcoming, non-judgmental love for all—insider and outsider, healthy and sick, moral and corrupt, sacred and secular, powerful and pitiful, upper crust and outcast. "Whosoever" (Mt. 11:4-6, KJV) became the broadest welcome of Jesus for all to follow him. We can do no less.

Wesley - Our understanding of Methodism, and our theological defense of the goal of inclusion for l/g/b/t/q disciples within the church, are nurtured in part from Wesley's writings. We do not suggest that Wesley himself accepted same-gender sexual relationships, since it was a century after his death before the normalcy of true homosexuality even began to be understood. But the following statement from *The Discipline* summarizes Wesley's approach to such matters.

Beyond the essentials of vital religion, United Methodists respect the diversity of opinions held by conscientious persons of faith. Wesley followed a time-tested approach: 'In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity.' The spirit of charity takes into consideration the limits of human understanding. 'To be ignorant of many things and to be mistaken in some,' Wesley observed, 'is the necessary condition of humanity.' The crucial matter in religion is steadfast love for God and neighbor, empowered by the redeeming and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. (? 102. Section 2)

In his teaching, Wesley affirmed diversity within all God's creation. He acknowledged that various persons are both created and raised differently, which results in what he termed "*the two grand, general hindrances*" to unity of belief and action; "*first, they cannot all think alike and, in consequence of this,*

secondly, they cannot all walk alike; but in several smaller points their practice must differ in proportion to the differences of their sentiments.” (This and subsequent quotations are from Wesley’s sermon, “A Catholic Spirit,” 1872 text.)

However, Wesley cautions us not to condemn another for such differences. He writes:

To be ignorant of many things, and to mistake in some, is the necessary condition of humanity.... Who can tell how far invincible ignorance may extend?... Every wise man, therefore, will allow others the same liberty of thinking which he desires they should allow him, and will no more insist on their embracing his opinions, than he would have them to insist on his embracing theirs. He bears with those who differ from him.... “Is thy **heart** right, as my heart is with thy heart?”



The Discipline – Like John Wesley, *The Discipline* sets before us a divine creation and a church, each inclusive of wide diversity in people and practices. We value such affirmations of individual responsibility and dignity as the following from “Our Doctrinal Heritage: Distinctive Wesleyan Heritage:”

The goodness of creation is fulfilled in human beings, who are called to covenant partnership with God. God has endowed us with dignity and freedom and has summoned us to responsibility for our lives and the life of the world.” (? 101. Section 1, Our Distinctive Heritage: Distinctive Wesleyan Emphasis)

Again affirming the inclusiveness within creation and intended within the church, we find one of the adjectives most frequently and most fervently used in *The Discipline* is the word *all*. For example:

???“The church is a community of **all** true believers...” (Constitution Preamble).

???“**All** persons, without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition shall be eligible...” (? 4, Article IV).

???“The Social Principles are a call to **all** members...” (Social Principles: Preface).

???“Primary for us is the gospel understanding that **all** persons are important—because they are human beings created by God and loved through and by Jesus Christ and not because they have merited significance” (? 161. The Nurturing Community: F Women and Men).

???“We recognize that sexuality is God’s good gift to **all** persons.... We call **all** persons to be the disciplined, responsible fulfillment of themselves, others, and society in the stewardship of this gift. ... (A) **all** persons are sexual whether or not they are married.... We insist that **all** persons, regardless of age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation, are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured.... **All** persons need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the human and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self” (? 161.G. Human Sexuality).

???“We affirm **all** persons as equally valuable in the sight of God. We therefore work toward societies in which each person’s value is recognized, maintained, and strengthened. We support the basic rights of **all** persons to equal housing, education, employment, medical care, legal redress for grievances, and physical protection” (? 162. III. The Social Community).

???“Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due to **all** persons. We are committed to supporting those rights and liberties for homosexual persons. We see a clear issue of simple justice in protecting their rightful claims...” (? 162.H. Equal Rights Regardless of Sexual Orientation).

???“Ordained persons exercise their ministry in covenant with **all** Christians, especially with those whom they lead and serve in ministry” (? 303.3. The Ministry of the Ordained, Sec. I).

The United Methodist Constitution, Division One, Article IV, affirms: “**All** persons” shall be eligible for membership and participation in its programs, and “no conference or other organizational unit of the Church shall be structured so as to exclude **any member** or any constituent body of the Church

because of race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition.” Is sexual orientation not a status? Is it not as influential a characteristic as race, color or national origin?

Perhaps the most persuasive language is found in *The Discipline’s* Part III. The Ministry of All Christians, Section IV, Called to Inclusiveness. The opening portion reads reads:



We recognize that God made **all** creation and saw that it was good. As a diverse people of God who bring special gifts and evidences of God’s grace to the unity of the Church and to society, we are called to be faithful to the example of Jesus’ ministry to **all** persons. Inclusiveness means openness, acceptance, and support that enables **all** persons to participate in the life of the Church, the community, and the world. Thus, inclusiveness denies any semblance of discrimination. (? 138)

But the paragraph goes on to contradict that high affirmation and to redefine the meaning of *all*. It concludes by stating that for United Methodists today, “inclusiveness” and “the freedom for total involvement” are limited to “all persons **who meet the requirements** of The United Methodist *Book of Discipline*.”

Critique – With that caveat, each General Conference is free to add to *The Discipline* any criteria for United Methodist members it may wish to exclude in the future, as it now has done only with lesbian and gay Christians. In direct contravention of our Constitution, it seems that every time *The Discipline* has referred to the inclusion of *all*, the later General Conference legislation adds the unwritten stipulation, “all *except* l/g/b/t/q United Methodist Christians.”

The Discipline pointedly notes that “Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth” and “need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment...” (? 161.G). It affirms, “Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due **all** persons. We are committed to supporting those rights and liberties for homosexual persons” (? 162.H). But these assurances ring hollow when it has already declared, “(W)e do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching” (? 161.G).

Of course, that statement is not a bar to church membership, since nothing in writing prevents l/g/b/t/q persons from joining any congregation that will have them. But few among us would want to be a member of a denomination in which our loving commitments are labeled as incompatible, relegated to a lower order of creation outside the General Conference’s criteria of acceptability.

In a coup for inconsistency, the General Conference allows l/g/b/t/q persons as members, but disallows them from ministry under appointment. It is clear that “*There is but one ministry in Christ*”(? 129), and, “*Such ministry is ratified in confirmation, where the pledges of baptism are accepted and renewed for life and mission*” (? 127). One would therefore assume on theological grounds that a Christian suitable for the “one ministry” of membership would likewise be at least an appropriate applicant for ordained ministry.

Not only are lesbian and gay applicants unacceptable, but even after church members have met the nine historic criteria for ordination (? 304) and all other requirements, have been ordained, are under appointment and are giving service acceptable to their bishops and their congregations, the General Conference has outlawed from ministry all lesbians and gay men as an entire genre. By adding a tenth and eleventh exclusion, it now requires “*fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness*” (? 304.2) only of clergy, not members, and that “*self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church*” (? 304.3).

Thus the multitude of worthily functioning lesbian and gay clergy and candidates are eliminated, with no explanation from the General Conference or *Discipline* as to why homosexual Christians should be deemed unacceptable, or why their service should be discredited and discarded.

The General Conference has violated the church’s own historic statements of faith as, since 1972, it has engaged in a legalistic campaign against Christians of same-gender orientation and love. It has

declared their very lives to be “incompatible with Christian teaching,” and eliminated them from the ministry. The judgmental character of its anti-l/g/b//t/q legislation turns the church away from reliance on God’s grace and scorns Jesus’ identification with the marginalized of society. The General Conference has substituted its own divisive legalisms as qualification for discipleship it considers faithful to Christian teaching.

We hold that such legislation by the General Conference constitutes a **heresy**—that is, a willful and persistent rejection by the General Conference of United Methodism’s historic statements of faith.

Our Mission - Heresy is a theological issue, subject to discussion, reconsideration and change. Therefore we challenge the General Conference to explain its anti-homosexual legislation on the basis of the preponderant witness of scripture, tradition, experience and reason, to enter into dialogue, and to be as open to reconsideration of these issues as it is open to other matters which come before it.

We seek to facilitate the church’s processes for reconsidering and reversing what we consider flawed positions. Our proposal for this reconsideration is **theological discourse** among all members, including reasoned scriptural study, historical documentation of the church’s faithful statements, honest dialogue and thoughtful argumentation. We call upon all United Methodist individuals and congregations to enter into this process.

We stand ready to help. Our Pacific Northwest Conference Reconciling Ministries Network asserts, “The Reconciling Ministries Network exists to be a healing voice within the climate of fear and misinformation about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered persons. We seek to create a welcoming climate in our churches where **all** persons are welcome to participate fully and equally” (from PNW RMN Mission Statement).

Second, we believe the doctrine of Reconciliation—the healing and restoring of the relationship of a person with other persons and of a person with God—defines the human ministry of the church. By contrast, rejecting and separating devoted Christians from the Body of Christ, the Church, becomes a sin.



Jesus – According to Jesus, a right relationship with God requires a right relationship with the neighbor. Wherever we in the church have deliberately rejected and broken that relationship, our initiative is likewise required to effect a reconciliation. *“If you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go; first be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift”* (Mt. 5:23-24).

Jesus is frequently critical of those who would exclude others whom they feel are beneath them. He calls his followers to become reconciled with those whom he personally chooses to welcome. In his central sermon summary, he cautions that it is the merciful who will obtain mercy (Mt. 5:7). In fact, Jesus warned the critics of John the Baptist that *“the tax collectors and prostitutes believed (in John’s teaching); and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him”* (Mt. 21:32).

In one defense of his welcome for those some found unacceptable, he noted, “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (Mt. 11:19). He was never deterred from welcoming those scorned by the religious establishment.

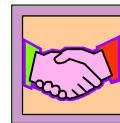
In an even closer identity with the religiously faithful among the marginalized persons, he concludes, *“Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother”* (Mt. 12:50).

Wesley – John Wesley was no less committed than Jesus to including within his circle of the faithful those so often marginalized and excluded by strict churchly standards. Even as a young Oxford student, through his Holy Club, Wesley engaged in prison ministries and befriended a “young Blair” in Bocado Prison, who had been found guilty of homosexual sodomy. Wesley vigorously supported his legal appeal, was castigated for defending him, and the criticism appears to have continued for years.¹⁴

In his sermon, he declares:

No man can choose for, or prescribe to, another. But every one must follow the dictates of his own conscience, in simplicity and godly sincerity. He must be fully persuaded in his own mind and then act according to the best light he has. Nor has any creature power to constrain another to walk by his own rule. God has given no right to any of the children of men thus to lord it over the conscience of his brethren, but every man must judge for himself, as every man must give an account of himself to God.

He adds, “My belief is no rule for another...,” then concludes, “If thou lovest God and all mankind, I ask no more: give me thine hand.”



The Discipline – Can l/g/b/t/q Christians be recognized with other United Methodists as one in Christ? We believe they must. Regarding the union of The Methodist Church & The Evangelical-United Brethren Church, *The Discipline* states: “*The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world, and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission in that world.*” “*The prayers and intentions ... have been and are ... that his people be one, in humility for the present brokenness of the Church and in gratitude that opportunities for reunion have been given*” (Constitution Preamble).

Further, the section on our “Distinctive Wesleyan Emphasis,” affirms: “The goodness of creation is fulfilled in human beings, who are called to covenant partnership with God. God has endowed us with dignity and freedom and has summoned us to responsibility for our lives and the life of the world” (? 101).

Critique – From a very human standpoint, the General Conference’s anti-homosexual legislation has demeaned Wesley’s emphasis on individual Christian responsibility, and has refused to credit l/g/b/t/q persons with accountability for their own lives. Even more, it has had a devastating effect on l/g/b/t/q persons, both church members and those in the larger society.

The Discipline decries suicide, and declares, “We deplore the condemnation of people who take their own lives...” and “The church has an obligation to see that all persons have access to needed pastoral and medical care and therapy in those circumstances that lead to loss of self-worth (and) suicidal despair...” (? 161.M). Yet nowhere does the church admit culpability in the loss of self-worth, suicidal despair and the suicide of its own l/g/b/t/q young people, who have been influenced in part by their church’s adamant rejection of their sexual orientation. Children of United Methodist families are clearly a part of the growing epidemic of teen suicides, and are among the estimated 30 per cent of teen-age suicides who were l/g/b/t/q.^{15 16}

In documented cases, the condemnation of faith communities has not only contributed to self-loathing, self-destructive behavior and suicide by l/g/b/t/q persons,¹⁷ in some cases it has even influenced their murderers.¹⁸ Reconciliation will require the church’s cultivation, restoration and healing of relationships with l/g/b/t/q persons it has so deliberately condemned.

Administratively, pastors receive conflicting directions. Under ? 161.G. Human Sexuality, they vow, “*We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.*” And in the section on “The Ministry of the Ordained,” pastors are directed “*to administer the Sacraments... and all other means of grace*” (? 331.1.b). In ? 331.1.i, it is clear regarding marriages that, “*The decision to perform the ceremony shall be the right and responsibility of the pastor.*” But in ? 332.6, Unauthorized Conduct, they are told that “*ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers,*” as if the blessing of God and the Church on loving life commitments were not their responsibility and were not grace-filled.

By withholding a means of grace from some who are baptized and confirmed, the General Conference legislation has the functional effect of separating and disfellowshipping l/g/b/t/q persons from the Body of Christ, and alienating their families. L/g/b/t/q persons also resent their pastor’s inability to provide a full ministry to them, since the clergy appear free to create a new liturgy to bless their house, their pet, or their boat, but may neither alter or create a liturgy for,¹⁹ nor otherwise bless, two life companions in their commitment of Christian love.

Further, the General Conference's forbidding of clergy to officiate at holy unions is a “Catch 22,” a moral dilemma which forces clergy to break either one vow or another, and requires an unethical choice among three bad alternatives:

- 1) They can obey the General Conference and decline a full ministry with l/g/b/t/q members, and thus violate both their conscience and their ordination vow to be in ministry to *all* members under their charge (? 303.3); or
- 2) They can obey conscience and vow, but violate the General Conference ban on holy unions, and be threatened with a church trial and loss of their ordination (? 332.6, and Judicial Council Decision 694, and ? 2702.1.b and Judicial Council Decision 702); or
- 3) They can withdraw from the United Methodist ministry (? 358).

In these various ways the General Conference is deliberately violating the integrity of church members and of clergy, thus rending the body of Christ in two.

The classical definition of sin is the willful separation of one from God, others or self. We hold that, by arbitrarily withholding full ministry from some members, by forcing clergy into one or another form of disobedience, and by inflicting irreparable harm upon l/g/b/t/q persons, these actions by the General Conference constitute a **sin**.

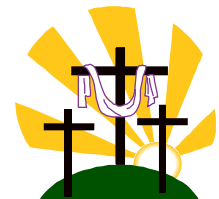
We call upon the General Conference to repent, turn away from sinfully divisive legislation, seek **reconciliation**, and work to restore relationship with those it has intentionally alienated.

Our Mission - Since the General Conference's actions against l/g/b/t/q persons are those of breaking human relationships, our response must take a relational form.

We urge all United Methodists to offer **interpersonal support** to all l/g/b/t/q persons throughout the church community. We call members to organize **advocacy for justice** at each level of the church's conferences—Charge Conference, District, Annual, Jurisdictional and General Conference. We call upon every United Methodist to work, in every loving and legal way at our disposal, to inform our membership and to overturn the sinful legislation of the General Conference. On the human side, this is our task, that the Body of Christ may be reconciled.

Our Pacific Northwest Conference Reconciling Ministries Network's tasks are clear. “The Reconciling Ministries Network encourages and supports all who want to be reconciled to Christ. Our Network supports, encourages, and equips pastors and lay to be instruments of justice within the church by inviting all persons to be full participants in the life of the church, both in policy and practice” (from PNW RMN Mission Statement).

Third, we believe the doctrine of Redemption—redemption of the individual, of the Church and of societal structures—refers to divine initiative, that is, the mission of God reaching out to a world and to a church ensnared in evil. For the church knowingly and willfully to cause or participate in evil becomes apostasy.



Jesus – For Jesus, the central act of redemption, on which “hang all the law and the prophets,” was for each individual to “love the Lord your God with all your heart...soul and...mind... and your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 22:37-38).

But Luke also writes of the “*redemption of Jerusalem*” (Lk. 2:38), which suggests that redemption is God's mission, at least for the body of the faithful (Jerusalem), if not for humanity in all its elements. So God's broader mission for the church is to seek the welfare and redemption of *all* persons. “All” must include *all* l/g/b/t/q persons, those within as well as beyond the church's membership.

As we seek to become an inclusive worshipping community, we remember Jesus' definition of who is faithful. “*The true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeks such to worship him*” (Jn.4:23).

To those Christians who condemn l/g/b/t/q persons and want to separate them from the church, we remind them of Jesus' admonition to let the wheat, and what some may perceive as weeds, grow together until harvest (Mt. 13:30), when God will make any needed selections.

More pointedly, those who would close church doors against l/g/b/t/q persons face Jesus' severest criticism. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, but when others are going in, you stop them" (Mt. 23:13). He goes on to caution, "You tithe..., and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the other.... You strain at a gnat and swallow a camel" (Mt. 23:23-24).

Wesley – Likewise, John Wesley sought fellowship with all who are redeemed, whatever the details of their faith or practice. His sermonic question was: "*Dost thou believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? Is he revealed in thy soul? ... Does he dwell in thee, and thou in him? ... Art thou fighting the good fight of faith, and laying hold of eternal life?*" An affirmative answer led him to fellowship with them in Christ.

Wesley concludes his sermon on "A Catholic Spirit" with this powerful admonition for inclusion of all the redeemed within the fellowship of the church, an affirmation which becomes a model and a measure of our loving service with and for l/g/b/t/q persons.

A man of a catholic spirit is one who... gives his hand to all whose hearts are right with his heart: ...all, of whatever opinion or worship or congregation, who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ; who love God and man; who, rejoicing to please, and fearing to offend God, are careful to abstain from evil, and zealous of good works. He is the man who,...having an unspeakable tenderness for their persons, and longing for their welfare, does not cease to commend them to God in prayer, as well as to plead their cause before men; who speaks comfortably to them, and labours, by all his words, to strengthen their hands in God. He assists them to the uttermost of his power in all things, spiritual and temporal. He is ready 'to spend and be spent for them,' yea, to lay down his life for their sake.

This also portrays our ministry with l/g/b/t/q persons.

The Discipline – We read the Constitution's opening paragraph as an inspiring and inclusive declaration about redemption and ministry. It becomes a different document when l/g/b/t/q behavior is not only not condoned, but in fact is declared incompatible.



The church is a community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. It is the redeemed and redeeming fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the church seeks to provide for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world. (Constitution Preamble)

For another example, "Scriptural holiness entails more than personal piety; love of God is always linked with love of neighbor, a passion for justice and renewal in the life of the world" (? 101. Our Doctrinal Heritage. Mission and Service).

In fact, this and many of United Methodism's most revered theological statements become severely compromised by the anti-gay legislation of the General Conference, leaving the church condemned by its own *Discipline*.

In their earlier form, The Social Principles could be read as supportive of the lifetime commitments of same-gender Christian couples and the families they formed.

(A)ll persons are important—because they are human beings created by God and loved through and by Jesus Christ.... We therefore support social climates in which human communities are maintained and strengthened for the sake of all persons and their growth (? 161. The Nurturing Community). We believe the family to be the basic human community through which persons are nurtured and sustained in mutual love, responsibility, respect, and fidelity. We understand the family as encompassing a wider range of options than that of the two-generational unit..." (? 161. II.A. The Family). "We further recognize the movement to find new

patterns of Christian nurturing communities...” (? 161.B. Other Christian Communities).

The statement goes on to affirm the beauty of a couple’s covenant “*expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment and shared fidelity.*” But the possible inclusiveness of the statement is compromised by the General Conference’s limited understanding, that these must be restricted to “*the sanctity of the marriage covenant,*” and only “*between a man and a woman*” (? 161.C Marriage). Otherwise countless same-gender Christian couples fit the self-same pattern of shared fidelity.

Critique - Redemption means validating, literally buying back and restoring, those who have been removed, alienated or lost. Redemption is God’s gracious work. Inviting and winning persons to receive redemption is the task of the church, expressed through its faithful embodiment of redemptive faith, hope and love.

Why should the General Conference deliberately use language which forces a devoutly Christian same-gender couple and family to feel excluded from the company of the redeemed, the body of Christ? We believe it must not. Further, its legislation has violated the church’s own long-standing Disciplinary affirmations of openness to all and ministry with all.

Equally unacceptable, the General Conference has capitulated to and become a participant in the evils of anti-homosexual rhetoric and the homophobic actions of secular society. Certainly this was not the intent of the General Conference members, but that is the result nevertheless. While we may wish it were not so, those in the secular world can now claim that United Methodist legislation justifies their homophobia.

Small wonder that the majority of l/g/b/t/q persons consider organized religion to be their enemy, since churches are a major source of the hostility, pain and suffering they experience. Little wonder that most tend to reject religious affiliation entirely, since they feel the churches have rejected them.

By declaring homosexuality incompatible, by rejecting qualified lesbian and gay clergy, by withholding some ministries of the church from l/g/b/t/ members, and by abetting society’s injury of all l/g/b/t/ persons, we consider the actions of the General Conference to constitute **apostasy**—a forsaking of the faith and a departure from our religious purposes and our order.

Our Mission – In face of its institutional apostasy, we call the General Conference to **seek its own redemption** through repentance and renewal, as it did in its 2000 Session regarding racial prejudice. We call individual Christians to **faithful obedience** to the gospel of Jesus, to the summons of our spiritual father, John Wesley, and to the historic affirmations in the Constitution and *Discipline* of our church.

As Reconciling United Methodists, we are moved to call the church to redemption, to right the wrongs and heal the hurts done to our United Methodist Christian sisters and brothers who find themselves to be homosexual. If faithful obedience to the Gospel occasionally forces us into ecclesiastical disobedience, we are reluctant but willing. We are fully prepared to support those clergy who minister to all, in faithfulness to their consciences and ordination vows.

More broadly, we seek the healing of, and justice for, all l/g/b/t/q persons, and their rightful restoration to equality in the human family.



We affirm that, “In supporting our sisters and brothers, the Reconciling Ministries Network in the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference can provide educational and worship resources and strategies that enable and empower all individuals and church organizations for Christian ministries in their efforts to be inclusive of l/g/b/t/q persons” (from PNW RMN Mission Statement).



Footnotes to II. OUR FOUNDATION DOCTRINES

¹⁴ Reference is in Vivian Hubert Howard Green, *John Wesley* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1964), p. 32. “Some

felt too that (the Holy Club's) championship of the prisoners was not always wise, and there was much talk in Oxford of Wesley's lack of discretion in taking up so eagerly the cause of young Blair, as unpopular with his fellow prisoners as with the townfolk, who was accused of homosexuality." One critic, Thomas Wilson, wrote in his diary of Blair's misdeed as "such an enormous crime." But Wesley wrote in a letter to John Clayton, Sept. 4, 1732, "I marshaled his evidence for him according to the best of my skill, and I cannot but think it will convince any reasonable man of his innocence." *Wesley's Journal*, v. 8, N. Curnock, ed. (London: Epworth Press, 1916) p. 279.

¹⁵ Caitlin Ryan and Donna Futterman note that literature often claims up to 30% of youth suicides annually are by l/g/b/t/q persons, based on a review of non-random studies and agency reports by Paul Gibson, for the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide [between 1972 and 1986], DHHS Publ. No. (ADM) 89-1623, Washington, DC, U. S. Gov. Printing Office, 1989. However it is corroborated by a more scientific 1995 study, the "Youth Risk Behavior Survey," Massachusetts Dept of Education, unpublished data, 1997. It also reports youth with same-sex experience were four times more likely than peers to attempt suicide. Details, including 70 related references, are cited in *Lesbian and Gay Youth: Care and Counseling*, Caitlin Ryan and Donna Futterman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 55-67.

¹⁶ The author is personally acquainted with United Methodist members of PFLAG whose l/g/b/t/q children have committed suicide, and a great many more whose children have considered or attempted it.

¹⁷ Op cit., Nelson., p. 165. "No gay person in our society can escape responding in some manner to the ways in which the Judeo-Christian tradition has dealt with homosexuality.... They do matter to many gay and lesbian clients."

Op cit., Ryan and Futterman, p. 29, caution, "Common psychological reactions to the stigma of being lesbian and gay include adjustment problems, impaired psychological development, family alienation, inadequate personal relationships, alcohol and drug abuse, depression, suicidal ideation, and sexual acting out.... Lack of support further compounds these problems...."

¹⁸ See Arthur Dong's award-winning 1997 documentary, *License to Kill*, interviews with seven prison inmates convicted of murdering homosexual persons, asking them, Why did you do it? Some referred to condemnation of lesbian and gay persons they heard in sermons in their faith communities. One claimed he was motivated by a sign he saw held up in public, "God said kill fags."

¹⁹ Judicial Council Decision 694.

CONCLUSION



In our denomination's first

church, like our society, to be midway through a period of discomfiting social transformation. As Stephanie Coontz notes, in times like these, "sweeping pronouncements about 'correct' family structure or value sometimes harm more people than they help."²⁰ She points out that cultural and social transformations, like the acceptance of homosexuality as a normal human condition, typically evolve through a series of stages.²¹ First comes a period of individual and family stress, when old understandings and practices are disrupted and new ones have yet to form. At the outset, most people fail to recognize that irreversible shifts are forcing society into new patterns of behavior, which in turn require new structures.

A second stage is one of public debate and cultural struggle, when those who have denied the new realities search for scapegoats, and strive to reverse the new trends. Differing factions compete with differing definitions of the problem, and demagogues can whip their followers to the point of a blaming frenzy. Only after society works its way through these two stages, of personal distress followed by social conflict, can society reach a period of restabilization, aware that change has occurred and cannot be reversed. Only then can the new values become society's cultural norms. Only then can persons guide their churches and cultural institutions in adapting their historic mores to the new realities.

Church Historian Eileen Lindner points out that such profound cultural change has never occurred in American society without the undergirding of sound and explicit theology as a base.²² We seek to aid in that process.

Of grave concern to us, especially during this second stage of cultural and religious struggle, are those church members and those General Conference delegates from all across the nation who feel caught in the middle of this controversy. Perhaps a majority of all Christians feel confused, unclear, embarrassed, and seek further light as they weigh the issues. These persons need not be deluged with a flood of angry sound bites from both sides. They require and deserve more serious attention than they are receiving from either side so far in the debate. They especially need to hear and participate in respectful dialogue.

Contrary to the General Conference, we believe that homosexuality and Christian teaching are fully

compatible.

In this paper we of the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference Reconciling Ministries Network offer our beliefs and our evaluations, primarily to those in our Annual Conference who are Reconciling United Methodists and to our own Reconciling Ministries Network. But we also offer our historical and theological convictions for deliberation in any forum of the entire church, just as *The Discipline* notes our United Methodist forebears did.



(E)ven as they were fully committed to the principles of religious toleration and theological diversity, they were equally confident that there is a ‘marrow’ of Christian truth that can be identified and that must be conserved. This living core, as they believed, stands revealed in Scripture, illuminated by tradition, vivified in personal and corporate experience, and confirmed by reason. (? 102. Section 2 Our Doctrinal History)

We earnestly seek to initiate study, discussion and dialogue among all Christians of good faith, and especially with those who may differ with our position. We hope for positive responses to our invitations:

- ?? For serious biblical study and interpretation;
- ?? For church-wide theological discussion;
- ?? For reconsideration of the General Conference’s divisive declarations;
- ?? For, at very minimum, acknowledgment and validation of the diversity of conviction among us regarding homosexuality.

We urge all United Methodists of conscience to read widely on these matters, discuss them freely, listen to all sides, and join in these endeavors.

Although certain actions of the General Conference purport to prohibit diversity and inclusiveness, we shall open our church doors to all, worship with all, share our ministries with all, and advocate for all who are oppressed. We are committed to The United Methodist Church, and we shall persevere in ministry with and for all of God’s people, looking to the day when Christ’s broken body may be one. •

Footnotes to CONCLUSION

²⁰ See the excellent two-volume study of American *Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap Really Are: Coming to Terms with America’s* Quotation is from the latter, p. 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111, ff. Coontz credits this social change theory to family sociologist Arlene Skolnick, “Changes of Heart: Family Dynamics in Historical Perspective,” in Philip Cowan et al., eds., *Family, Self and Society: Toward a New Agenda for Family Research* (Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1992), pp. 52-56.

²² The Rev. Dr. Eileen W. Lindner, then Associate General Secretary for Christian Unity, the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, in an unpublished address to the PFLAG National Board, Orlando, Florida, Sept. 12, 1987.



families by Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), and *The Way We Changing Families* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

To Plead the Cause® is a theological study paper initiated by the Reconciling Ministries Network in the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference intended for its members and supporters.

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It may be downloaded free with Adobe Acrobat Reader at <http://www.RMNetwork.org/other/ToPlead.pdf>.

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