



Michigan Conference

The United Methodist Church

A message to lay leadership and clergy

A pastoral message on General Conference from Bishop David A. Bard

March 7, 2019

Dear Appointed Clergy and Lay Leaders in the Michigan Conference of The United Methodist Church,

Greetings in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the peace and power of the Holy Spirit. Thank you for your leadership and thank you for taking time to read this letter.

By now you are all well-aware of the actions of the recently concluded special session of the General Conference. The General Conference acted to affirm portions of the Traditional Plan which maintains current language around LGBTQIA inclusion and ordination, which maintains traditional language about marriage and the limitations on clergy officiating at weddings, and which adds enhanced enforcement provisions. The constitutionality of a number of petitions passed has yet to be determined and none of the provisions will take effect until January 1, 2020. I encourage patience in the midst of this uncertainty and lack of clarity. I also encourage you to take a measure of care when reading materials about the General Conference, for they may not all be accurate.

I know that among you and among the members of your congregation there are a variety of reactions to General Conference, from pleased to pained, from deep disappointment to a deep sense of relief. There is anger, anguish and anxiety. Some see opportunities lost and some see disaster averted. The realities in our congregations are complicated. Not everyone who wanted more space created for LGBTQIA persons in the church are theological liberals. Not every person who holds a traditional view of marriage and human sexuality supported the Traditional Plan approved at General Conference. Some LGBTQIA persons and their families are simply done with The United Methodist Church and some are determined to remain.

What most agree upon is that this is a challenging and difficult time for The United Methodist Church. Emotions continue to run high. Reactivity is at a fever pitch, and social media is a great reactivity machine. How might we lead together in such a time as this?

I encourage you, as I encourage myself, to lead from a place that acknowledges all the thoughts, feelings and experiences within you and within the people in your places of ministry. I invite you to encourage others to such acknowledgement. Then I invite us to lead by creating space for people to sit with and hold their experiences, ruminate on them, integrate them deeply into their sense of themselves in

relationship to the God of Jesus Christ. In the language of psychotherapy and leadership, I ask us to lead by helping create holding environments. Holding environments allow people to acknowledge all that is going on within them, help them deal with their painful emotions, and provide an opportunity to put their experiences into perspective. Holding environments facilitate adaptive work, the kind of work that requires new learning, the kind of work we need right now in the church. The season of Lent which we are now entering is sort of a liturgical holding environment, and I hope you will [read my recent blog](#) about Lent on the Michigan Conference web page.

Forgive the technicality of some of that last section, but when I have been asking people to be less reactive, some have only heard me say “wait,” and they are frustrated by that. Indeed, there is a need to wait on some further information coming from the Judicial Council. However, I am not encouraging you to lead by simply asking people to wait. I am asking you to work with me in encouraging people to allow time to process their experience so that we might all be at our creative best when thinking about moving in to the future.

The future may include a United Methodist Church that is no longer united. General Conference starkly revealed the depth of our divisions and some of the animosity they generate. Might those who seek more space for LGBTQIA persons and ministry with these persons seek a new expression of Methodism? Might those who fully support the Traditional Plan decide to do something new? Might there be as yet unexplored possibilities for a new kind of connectionalism? Uncertainty remains, but I am committed to thinking creatively with you and others about options in the midst of this uncertainty. As leaders, I ask you to communicate to others that possibilities for a new future, perhaps something very different, will be actively entertained in the coming months.

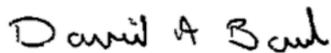
Two final thoughts. Though this is a difficult time for The United Methodist Church, with feelings running high and uncertainty in the air, the ministry to which God has called all of us in Jesus Christ remains. Hungry people need feeding. Those mired in poverty need people to accompany them. The addicted need to know there are possibilities for freedom. Frayed relationships need mending. Injustices need to be righted. People feeling unloved need to be loved and welcomed. Wounded people need healing. Those lacking direction need some guidance. People hungering for God need to hear the good news about Jesus Christ. People seeking to deepen their faith need opportunities for growth. You are in ministry in different ways and in different places, and that ministry needs to continue.

As your bishop, I am with you in the midst of all that is happening, and with you in ministry. Leading up to General Conference I worked diligently to share information that was accurate and credible. I also shared my support for the One Church Plan and when I write about the deep disappointment of many who had hoped for more space for LGBTQIA persons in the church, that disappointment is also mine.

I nevertheless remain the bishop for all United Methodists in Michigan, whether you agree with me or not. Among the web of values which led me to support the One Church Plan, are values of kindness, compassion, and fairness. The words of I Peter about “sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind” (I Peter 3:8) are written in my soul. The words of John Wesley that “though we may not think alike, may we not love alike” echo in my heart. We need not agree about everything for me to support the good work you do in ministry, to celebrate with you your joys personal and professional, to mourn your sorrows. If the time comes when we extend the hand of Christian friendship in a wave good-bye, we will cross that bridge then. In the meantime, I will offer my best to you and to Jesus Christ as bishop of the Michigan Area.

I invite you to join me in providing the leadership the Michigan United Methodist Church needs at this time, leadership which promotes less reactivity and more thoughtfulness, leadership which offers a holding environment that fosters creativity and adaptive work, leadership that is rooted in and promotes soul work, leadership that helps move the ministry of the church forward even in this uncertain time.

Grace and Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David A Bard". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Bishop David Alan Bard
Michigan Conference of The United Methodist Church