

A Pastoral Letter to the People of The United Methodist Church From the Council of Bishops

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May we all live our lives in such a way that others will see God's grace shining through us!

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By grace you have been saved through faith.--Ephesians 2:8 Grace to you from Jesus Christ who calls his church to welcome all people into the community of faith as it proclaims the Gospel.

The Judicial Council, our denomination's highest judicial authority, recently issued a decision regarding a pastor's refusing a gay man's request for membership in the church. In the case, this man was invited to join the choir at the United Methodist Church in the community. As he became more active in the choir and the church, he asked to transfer his membership from another denomination to The United Methodist Church. Because he is a practicing homosexual, the pastor refused to receive him into church membership. The Judicial Council upheld the pastor's refusal of membership.

While pastors have the responsibility to discern readiness for membership, homosexuality is not a barrier. With the Social Principles of The United Methodist Church we affirm "that God' grace is available to all, and we will seek to live together in Christian community.

We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons" (para. 161g, 2004 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church).

We also affirm our Wesleyan practice that pastors are accountable to the bishop, superintendent, and the clergy on matters of ministry and membership.

The United Methodist Church is committed to making disciples of Jesus Christ with all people. We, the bishops of the Church, uphold and affirm that the General Conference has clearly spoken through the denomination's Constitution on inclusiveness and justice for all as it relates to church membership:

"The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth. All persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, upon baptism be admitted as baptized members, and upon taking the vows declaring the Christian faith, become professing members in any local church in the connection" (Article IV, Constitution of The United Methodist Church).

We believe the ministry of the local church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is to help people accept and confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We call upon all United Methodist pastors and laity to make every congregation a community of hospitality.

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Lake Junaluska, N.C.