



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA CONFERENCE

POST OFFICE BOX 18750

CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA 28218

J. LAWRENCE McCLESKEY
RESIDENT BISHOP

TELEPHONE
704/535-2260
FAX 704/535-9160

EPISCOPAL LETTER FOR LAITY AND CLERGY OF THE WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA ANNUAL CONFERENCE THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

August 16, 2005

Dear United Methodist Friends:

Grace and peace to you in God our Creator, Jesus Christ our Savior, and the Holy Spirit our Counselor.

In recent days I have received a sizeable number of messages regarding the “Hearts on Fire” conference sponsored by the Reconciling Ministries Network and scheduled to be held at the Lake Junaluska Assembly, September 2-5, 2005. In response to these messages I have prepared this statement, which I believe to be a responsible interpretation of THE BOOK OF DISCIPLINE (2004) and of biblical insight on these matters. I request that you read this entire statement carefully and prayerfully.

THE BOOK OF DISCIPLINE is clear about our denomination’s stance on the practice of homosexuality: “Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider (sic) this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” (Paragraph 161.G)

THE BOOK OF DISCIPLINE is equally clear about the attitude the church is called to take with and towards all persons, and these words follow immediately those quoted above: “We affirm that God’s 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.” (Paragraph 161.G)

I interpret these statements to be, on the one hand, a clear stance against the practice of homosexuality and, at the same time, a clear admonition to be in Christian communication and ministry with persons regardless of their sexual orientation.

Further, THE BOOK OF DISCIPLINE is clear in its prohibition of the use of church funds “to promote the acceptance of homosexuality.” Paragraph 612.19 says that it is the responsibility of the Annual Conference Council on Finance and Administration “to ensure that no annual conference board, agency,

committee, commission, or council shall give United Methodist funds to any gay caucus or group, or otherwise use such funds to promote the acceptance of homosexuality.” Paragraph 806.9 charges the General Council on Finance and Administration with the same responsibility as regards general church funds.

The fact is, contrary to what some persons have implied about the “Hearts on Fire” conference, no church funds (annual conference, jurisdictional conference, or general church funds) are being used to support this event.

In the decision for this conference to be held at Lake Junaluska Assembly, all disciplinary provisions around this issue are being faithfully upheld:

- 1) The United Methodist Church’s stance on the practice of homosexuality is being clearly represented, as the August 10 statement issued by Jimmy Carr, Executive Director of the Southeastern Jurisdictional Administrative Council, has delineated. This statement has been sent to all Western North Carolina Conference district offices.
- 2) The United Methodist Church’s stance to be in ministry with all persons, in an affirmation of God’s grace, is being clearly represented, as Mr. Carr’s statement also delineates.
- 3) The United Methodist Church’s stance on the use of church funds is being honored.

For these reasons I believe the decision for the Lake Junaluska Assembly to host this conference, as an expression of our call to Christian hospitality and ministry, is appropriate and in keeping with both the letter and the spirit of THE BOOK OF DISCIPLINE.

An enormous amount of negative energy is being generated around this issue, and it is implied that this one event is the basis upon which our church is going to succeed or fail. I do not believe that. I am aware that United Methodists hold strong and diverse opinions about this issue. That does not bother me. What does trouble me is the animosity and mean-spiritedness which persons on each side of the issue have expressed towards those who differ with them. I know personally United Methodists who are strongly opposed to this event and United Methodists who are strongly supportive of it. I know persons on both sides of this issue who love Christ and The United Methodist Church deeply.

I pray for civility in our differences. I pray for grace in our search for unity. I pray for unity in Christ which recognizes our diversity. I pray that the negative energy being expended around this event may somehow be transformed into positive emphasis on our primary mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ. He never called us to agree with each other, but he often admonished us to love one another. Whether we do that, he taught us, is the primary test of our discipleship!

Sincerely in Christ,

J. Lawrence McCleskey, Resident Bishop
Charlotte Area, The United Methodist Church