

A Pastoral Note from Pastor Cori:

Bill Hybels, former pastor of Willow Creek Church, was the first to declare that “the local church is the hope of the world.” The local church, the collection of people from varying backgrounds, worldviews, and priorities gathered together for the same purpose- to love God and love others. The local church is the hope of the world because the people that make up those bodies are the ones on the ground, building relationships, sharing the love of God with others, showing the world how to live as followers of Christ. They are the ones doing the dirty work of Kingdom building.

Today, many of those local churches have collected themselves into denominations, groups of churches united by things like theology (beliefs), practice, geography, ethnicity, etc. We belong to a denomination called The United Methodist Church, which began in 1968 with the merger of two denominations: The Methodist Church (to which our church belonged) and the Evangelical United Brethren Church. Some 50 years later, the UMC now includes 13 million members, gathered into 43,000 churches, located in 136 countries! It has become one of the largest Protestant denominations in existence.

We have a long and beautiful history of united service in love and mission to this world. In fact, our denominational mission statement expresses just that: Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The mission has given us a unified purpose, and helped to hold together millions of people with different viewpoints and opinions, albeit oftentimes with great tension.

However, our denomination has come to a pivotal point in that struggle to maintain that unity. As you may or may not be aware, our culture is locked in a pretty heated battle of issues of sexuality, especially with regard to LGBTQ issues. This struggle has found its way into our denomination, and we are facing the reality that not everyone agrees on how to address the concerns raised by our culture when it comes to homosexual practice and inclusion in the life of the church.

Almost since the beginning of our denomination, we have been struggling with this issue and how to proceed lovingly, seeking God’s will for our church, considering scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. In 1972, following several years of discernment and debate, language was added to our Book of Discipline affirming that “all persons are of sacred worth,” but affirms that “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching (§ 304.3).” This has been followed by the affirmations that all persons may attend services, participate in worship, receive sacraments, and become members of local churches. But with regard to the marriage covenant, marriage is affirmed as the union of one man and one woman; and with regard to ordination and becoming a pastor, “self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve The United Methodist Church (§ 304.3).” These statements affirm the teaching of scripture, of the church for 2000 years, and are in keeping with the majority of Christian Churches today.

For 46 years, we as a church, as well as our culture, have been debating and discerning God’s will with regard to human sexuality. In recent years, the struggles have increased, and the culture has become more vocal with regard to changing the church’s long-held beliefs regarding marriage and sexual practice. Many bible-believing Christians are divided on how to address these issues and lovingly serve those within the LGBTQ community.

Next month, Feb 23-26, our top decision making body, the General Conference (which traditionally meets every 4 years), will be meeting in a special called session to discuss how the church can find a way forward through these struggles. During that meeting in St. Louis, MO, elected delegates from Annual Conferences all over the world will be gathering to pray, discuss, and vote on a plan for a way forward. Their work began almost two years ago when our 2016 General Conference met and asked our bishops to call together a commission to present a plan for the church to discern a way to continue in our mission and address the issues regarding sexuality.

At the meeting next month, the delegates will be considering three plans that have been put forth by that commission: the “One Church Plan,” the “Connectional Conference Plan,” and the “Traditional Plan,” and one other plan submitted by other members of the denomination: the “Simple Plan.” The chart below summarized these four plans.

One Church Plan	Connectional Plan	Traditional Plan	Simple Plan
<p>-Affirms we are not in agreement regarding human sexuality</p> <p>-Affirms sexual relations only within the covenant of a monogamous marriage between two adults (as opposed to one man and one woman)</p> <p>-Allows conferences to determine if they will ordain self-avowed practicing homosexuals</p> <p>-Gives local churches the power to decide if they will host same-sex weddings</p> <p>-Gives pastors the right to decide whether they will officiate same-sex unions</p>	<p>-Creates three connectional conferences based on their understanding of these homosexual issues: Progressive, Unity, and Traditional</p> <p>-Allows each conference to adapt portions of the Book of Discipline to their context of ministry</p> <p>-Requires Annual Conferences, local churches, and pastors to choose which connectional conference to belong to</p> <p>-Requires numerous constitutional amendments to implement</p>	<p>-Continues the UMC's current biblical position on homosexuality, with regard to marriage and ordination, while continuing to affirm the sacred worth of all person</p> <p>-Maintains and strengthens the current Book of Discipline language</p> <p>-Enhances accountability with regard to upholding Book of Discipline standards, especially with regard to clergy conduct</p> <p>-Provides a gracious exit for Annual Conferences, Local Churches, and pastors who cannot abide by the Book of Discipline</p>	<p>-Removes all language referring to homosexual practice in the Book of Discipline, with the hope that this will bring a resolution to our struggles.</p>

Understanding that there are so many things that go into our understanding of and opinions regarding human sexuality, and that we have no idea what will come out of this General Conference session or what it may mean for the future of our denomination and our local congregation, as your pastor I encourage the following steps:

- 1) Be in prayer for our denomination and especially the special called General Conference on February 23-26, 2019.
- 2) Be in prayer for our local congregation as we move forward in the midst of this struggle.
- 3) Focus on what is important, being and making disciples for Jesus Christ, loving God and serving others, and sharing the Gospel with a world in need.
- 4) Understand that an intelligent, compassionate, bible-believing Christian can see this issue very differently than you. When you speak, share the truth as you understand it, in love, and try as hard to understand where the other person is coming from as you try hard to articulate your understanding.
- 5) Seek God's guidance through His Word- the Bible- which is our ultimate source of truth and the final test for all things.
- 6) Find further information regarding the issues facing the UMC. There is a handout on the Resource table in the Fellowship Hall that summarizes all the major plans and their potential impacts. You can also find more in-depth information on the UMC website: umc.org/topics/general-conference-2019-special-session.
- 7) Have a conversation with Pastor Cori about your views, your concerns, and your hopes for our church and our denomination.
- 8) Attend one of the Discussion Sessions scheduled for Sunday, January 27, at either 11:30 AM or 6 PM at the church.

The local church is truly the hope of the world, because it is the people of God seeking to introduce the world to Christ! My greatest desire is that we do not allow the struggles over issues of sexuality, or any other social justice issue the world may throw at us, to divide us, to destroy our witness, or to prevent us from being and making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of this world!

In His humble service,

Pastor Cori Conran