



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

VIRGINIA CONFERENCE

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Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Virginia Conference,

Greetings in the name and spirit of the Risen Christ who promises to journey with us always!

Another step along the journey of our United Methodist Church was taken on Friday. The Church's Judicial Council (Supreme Court) reviewed, in the light of our Church Constitution, the church laws that were passed by our Special General Conference (global legislative body) in late February. The actions of that General Conference centered on our Church's positions related to the practice of homosexuality.

Many faithful United Methodists and churches have been significantly impacted by these decisions. Some have agreed, some have disagreed. Regardless of people's perspectives, many questions have been raised, hurt inflicted, unity tested, prayers raised and significant conversations started about our future. Let us always remember that this is about people's lives, for whom Christ died and rose again.

At the conclusion of this letter, I will share links to resources in which you can find detailed explanations of each decision that the Judicial Council made. Here, in simple language, I want to summarize the basics of our Church position and changes that were found to be constitutional. **Most of the changes will take effect starting January 1, 2020 except for the "gracious exit" provisions which are effective from now until December 31, 2023.**

1. **NOTHING CHANGED ABOUT** the Church position that "all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God," and that "we will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us." "We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons." The Church also believes that "sexual relations are affirmed only with the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage." and it does not allow same-sex marriages in our churches and by our pastors. The church does not ordain or appoint "self-avowed practicing homosexuals".
2. **MAJOR CHANGES FOUND CONSTITUTIONAL**
 - a. The definition of "self-avowed practicing homosexual" now includes people living in same-sex marriage, domestic partnership or civil union, or who publicly state it. These persons are not considered qualified for United Methodist ministry.
 - b. Boards or District Committees on Ministry must make a full examination and shall not approve anyone who does not meet the qualifications for ministry and the bishop shall rule unqualified persons, if recommended, "out of order." Bishops may not consecrate a "self-avowed practicing homosexual" as a bishop.
 - c. A pastor who has conducted a same-sex marriage shall be given a minimum penalty, after due, fair process, of one-year suspension without pay for a first offense and termination for a second.
 - d. If allegations are brought against a pastor, any resolution of the offense must include agreement from the person bringing the allegation. The resolution must identify the harm caused and how that will be addressed by the pastor.

3. **SEVEN PROPOSED CHANGES WERE FOUND UNCONSTITUTIONAL**. Some of these sought to provide a way in which to certify that only persons who would “uphold, enforce, and maintain” the *Book of Discipline* (our book of order) could serve in certain committees. Other proposals suggested an additional process for removing bishops from active office. The Judicial Council found these unconstitutional because of lack of balanced and fair processes.
4. **"GRACIOUS EXIT PROPOSAL"** was found to be constitutional for churches thinking of leaving the United Methodist denomination concerning homosexuality for a limited time from now until December 31, 2023. They would have a "limited right" to disaffiliate for reasons related to the Church's law concerning homosexuality for a limited time. Approval for such a move would require:
 - a. A two-thirds vote of the members of the local church
 - b. Terms related to financial and legal matters, apportionments and clergy pensions
 - c. Approval by a majority vote of the Annual Conference

When I was growing up, I had a Sunday School teacher who was fond of saying, “God has brought us this far...and God isn’t finished with us yet!” While the decisions by the 2019 General Conference and the rulings of the Judicial Council are important, they are, by no means, the final word in the journey of The United Methodist Church.

Take some time to read the detailed material and reports that are linked to this letter. Talk to those of different perspectives in your local church and community. In less than two weeks, I will begin to visit all of our districts for further conversation and worship with you ([see the link to your invitation](#)). Then the Virginia Annual Conference will gather in Roanoke June 20-22. Visitors are welcome.

In just about one year, May, 2020, the General Conference will convene again to further pray, discern, further refine, and redefine who we are as United Methodists, as we have for over 250 years. This is not a time for “waiting” but for working with one another, building relationships with all of God’s people and seeking God’s will for our next steps on the journey. Please feel free to contact your District or our conference office with questions or concerns. As Wesley reminded us: “Best of all, God is with us!”

Grace and Peace,



Peter D. Weaver
Interim Bishop, Virginia Conference

View the Judicial Council ruling: <http://www.umc.org/decisions/79922>;
<http://www.umc.org/decisions/79923>

Learn more about the Judicial Council ruling: <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/court-oks-part-of-traditional-plan-exit-plan>

Council of Bishops statement on ruling:

https://vaumc.org/pages/news/2019vanews/2019vanews_cobresponseapril26_2019