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Friends, I am deeply wounded by the decision against inclusivity made by the recent UMC General Conference. I am deeply saddened for the pain of rejection experienced by LGBTQ+ colleagues. I am very grateful to those who worked so hard to find a path to unity in spite of our differences. Many have spoken eloquently about events in St. Louis and the issues of theology, polity, constitutionality, and implications for ministry. The spirit has led me to share this open letter.

An Open Letter to Non-US Delegates Who Voted for the Traditional Plan (and its punitive additions) at the UMC General Conference in St. Louis

It has been my privilege to teach, preach, lecture, worship and engage in mission on every continent except Antarctica. I have made profound friendships that I cherish. I have been amazed and grateful for the vitality that I have seen in the global church. In the United Methodist Church your growing churches have been recognized with a growing voice in the life of the church and a growing number of votes at our General Conference. This week you have used that voice to exclude many and divide the denomination that gave you birth. I know that not everyone in your conferences agrees with you, but your witness and votes at the General Conference were mostly of one mind. Even though an option was before you to allow unity while honoring our differences, you insisted that this is not acceptable. You even discussed on the floor of the GC your hope that those who do not agree with you could make a "gracious withdrawal" or an "honorable exit." In other words, you hoped any who did not agree with you would go quietly.

I think you may have believed that you were excluding LGBTQ+ persons from the United Methodist Church ministry and some of its services. You were wrong! You were excluding me. You were excluding all of those United Methodists who, like me, believe that there are no subcategories of "persons of sacred worth." There are no persons less sacred and less worthy that should therefore be excluded from ministry and participation in all of the services (such as marriages) and work of the church merely because of who God created them to be. For me and thousands of other United Methodists there is no division into us and them. You quote to us a few verses from the Bible that are mostly scattered references in passing, never developed by any biblical witness into a tenet of faith, never mentioned by Jesus and largely ignored in the history of the church, and you would divide us for this? By the way, how are you coming on obeying and enforcing those other laws in Leviticus?

But let's talk about the Bible. I truly care about it. I have spent 51 years as a full-time teacher of the Bible; this has been my calling and my ministry. Forty-eight of those years I have taught at Wesley Theological Seminary where I have also taught many of your pastors and some of your bishops. I have taught in twelve seminaries outside of the United States, and I cherish the students I have come to know and love in those places. But the Bible was not meant to be used as a weapon to divide. John Wesley, Martin Luther, and John Calvin agreed that the authority of scripture does not reside in individual verses, especially not used as weapons to castigate and divide. They believed and I believe that scripture must be read through the centering authority of the gospel as made evident in Jesus Christ and as weighed against the reading of the whole of the canonical witness. I cannot believe that Jesus Christ would have approved of the tenor of the debate this week. It was the Pharisee opponents of Jesus who constantly asked, "Who has done something wrong and can be excluded?" Jesus asked instead, "How can the broken be made whole?" It was the witness of Eph. 2 that in Jesus Christ the dividing walls of hostility are broken down and the far off brought near.

Here is what an aging Bible teacher must say to you in all charity, the issues on which you are willing to divide the church are barely mentioned in the Bible and nowhere seen as central tenets of faith and practice. I have some interest in biblical ethics. There are some moral and ethical concerns that are widespread and centrally important in the Bible: feeding the hungry, opposing oppression, seeking peace, caring for God's creation to name a few. Do you understand that you are dividing the church's witness on these central issues for the sake of the handful of scattered verses you are using as prooftexts to impose your will on a church that is not of one mind on this matter.

And many of you have expressed the desire that those of us who stand in solidarity with LGBTQ+ persons of faith in our denomination and share the pain of their rejection as our pain should now "graciously withdraw." I will not withdraw from the United Methodist Church. I am a cradle Methodist and proud to be a part of the Wesleyan tradition of grace. I did not address this letter to the American delegates who voted for the Traditional Plus Plan because I think the tide has already turned in the U. S. toward greater inclusivity, tolerance and unity in love. American delegates voted, by many reliable reckonings, almost two to one in favor of the One Church Plan. United Methodists under the age of 35 are overwhelmingly in favor of acceptance and unity, in spite of our differences. Did you really listen to the Young People's petition that garnered over 15,500 signatures in less than 14 hours? We live here in many congregations that do not all

agree on this issue but continue to work together, accept each other, and worship in love. The margin of support for a church family that includes our faithful and gifted LGBTQ+ friends and colleagues will only grow. And your allies on this matter in the American church will grow fewer. You see, I believe that God is busy doing a new thing in the church (Isa. 43:10). Perhaps you know of God's new thing in the abolition of slavery or the ordination of women? Opponents on those issues also claimed they were only following the Bible. And no amount of added enforcement measures will stop the tide of acceptance, inclusion and love that is inexorably coming in to embrace and include our faithful LGBTQ+ colleagues. Some in pain and discouragement will leave our church and seek community elsewhere. I do understand this. And this is a great loss to the UMC. I hope others will hear the word that my friend and former student, T. C. Morrow, heard addressed to her in a dream, "Stay the course."

Nevertheless, I feel that I, personally, must withdraw at this time from further partnership in ministry with your conferences. I cannot withdraw from friendships and prayer for the many areas of faithful mission and ministry in which you are engaged. But, for now, I cannot continue to go where you have declared I am not wanted. But my withdrawal is not gracious. I am wounded and saddened that you might want to accept me and not the fully inclusive church to which I am committed. I will not be continuing in any ministries or programs in your conferences for this season of division you have imposed upon us. I do not know what other individuals, congregations or conferences may decide but as a matter of conscience I cannot act as if you have not sought to divide us. I will gladly return to partnership in a genuinely United Methodist Church. Our unity need not be uniformity. We understand that your social settings are quite different from ours. But vote to allow a unity in spite of our differences, and an acceptance of the diversity of our setting. There is another General Conference coming up soon. I will gladly return in partnership. But you should be clear: my LGBTQ+ colleagues will be coming with me.

Blessings,  
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