

Statement on the 2019 General Conference
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March 3, 2019

As you know, last week I was among the 864 delegates who met for the special General Conference in St. Louis, the highest governing body of our nearly 13 million member global denomination. Some of you followed the proceedings closely, others not so closely. But by now, most of you have seen the headlines in the papers, or postings on Facebook or other social media.

A lot has been said, not all of it accurate, and not all of it fair. For example, contrary to a post I was shown, I saw no celebrations by anyone after any votes, nor did I participate in any such celebrations. After the last vote, I was depleted and empty, and returned to my room, which I did not leave the rest of the night.

It is important to remember that this general conference was called for a specific purpose: to make a decision on what the teachings and practices of the United Methodist Church on sexuality and same-sex marriage would be. All the plans that were before the delegates, one way or another, sought to address that question, and determine what the *Book of Discipline* would say, and what kinds of marriage services would or would not be permitted, and under what conditions, in various parts of our global church. That is what the conference was about.

It was *not* about who's in and who's out. It was *not* about who hates and who loves. And it was *not* about who is welcome and who is not. Everyone is, and will continue to be, welcome in this church, and at this table, so long as Pastor Janet and I are here.

As I said in my email to the congregation last Thursday, the actions taken by the conference actually have changed very little. The *Discipline* retains the same language and rules that it has for decades. Most of the changes introduced were attempts to make more explicit and accountable that which many assumed was implicit for years; for example, that bishops and boards of ordained ministry would make their decisions in accord with what the *Discipline* says.

The only new thing was the language adopted on disaffiliation, which would allow churches to leave the denomination with their property. But the bar for that is rather high, with requirements that I suspect few churches will be able to meet. And it has yet to be tested for its constitutionality. But on the whole, there is really very little that is different in the United Methodist Church today than was the case two weeks ago.

Now, I must tell you, the General Conference was a painful experience for me, and for most who were there. It was draining, and frankly did not seem to me

to be the church, but was much more like a political convention, with lapel buttons, slogans, protesters, parliamentary maneuvers, and more.

Many left feeling deeply wounded. Those who identify as LGBTQIAP left feeling rejected and judged; those who sincerely believe in traditional marriage left feeling slandered and abused. Sadly, the rhetoric and style of our political culture has infected the church, and I was embarrassed for us. We did not provide a good witness to the world. We must find another way to deal with this matter.

I was also reinforced in my growing belief that these structures – conferences, general conferences, national boards and such – are not the church. The real church is here: the worshipping, praying, serving community, where people have developed relationships for years; where people love all their neighbors in concrete ways; where together people seek to understand and grow in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, week in and week out.

That is the real church – and if there can be a solution to this divide within our denomination, it will much more likely be found here, than at global meetings governed by Robert's Rules of Order.

As your ministers, Janet and I want to lead this congregation in a way that keeps the main thing the main thing, which is to proclaim and share the transforming love of Christ in word and deed throughout our community, and our world. I ask you to help us keep that focus where it belongs. And with regard to the question over which we find ourselves divided, I ask you to pray, and to trust, that God will enable us to find our own way forward.