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## A PASTORAL LETTER ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

### **Sisters and Brothers in Christ,**

I want to respond to concerns raised by some of our United Methodist sisters and brothers about my support of Referendum 74, including my appearance in the media campaign produced by Washington United for Marriage. For those who are troubled, I pray you will read with a spirit of openness, just as I listen and strive to understand your concerns with an open mind.

To my understanding, Referendum 74 allows for religious freedom in stating that each denomination, church, and clergy person can follow their own conscience when it comes to enactment, and that the supported law does not force anyone to disregard their own beliefs on this issue. In my mind, this is the highest expression of the democratic principle of freedom found in our own U.S. Constitution. Or as our Book of Discipline declares in defining the rationale for our mission:

*As we make disciples, we respect persons of all religious faiths and we defend religious freedom for all persons. ¶121*

If the referendum passes and SB 6239, the 'Marriage Equality Act', becomes Washington state law, this *does not* change *The Book of Discipline* or impact the polity of The United Methodist Church. The ongoing conversation about homosexuality in our denomination and the actions of voters in Washington are separate, if related, issues. Any prohibitions in place restricting the actions of clergy and the use of property remain regardless of passage.

The Marriage Equality bill has my support because it does not mandate anyone to do anything they do not want to do, and this is in harmony with my own stance on religious freedom. I believe that it is also consistent with our United Methodist heritage and our shared practice of honoring the deeply held beliefs of others, even when we do not fully agree with them. Was it not John Wesley, on the occasion of riots opposing Methodism, who wrote the following to Roman Catholics in Ireland?

*"Then, if we cannot as yet think alike in all things, at least we may love alike.  
Herein we cannot possibly do amiss."*

Wesley's letter and these words were offered as an olive branch to those who saw things differently enough to riot and to declare John's brother, Charles, "an imposter, incendiary and messenger of Satan." How we all could learn from such generosity of spirit!

As a Bishop, I am called to serve and lead churches with faithful people who too often stake out their respective corners in the big tent we call United Methodism. Our Pacific Northwest Annual Conference passed legislation to support SB 6239, the Marriage Equality Act to which Referendum 74 refers. I am a Bishop called to serve the majority who strongly affirmed this legislation in Pasco this past June but I also experience deeply my calling to serve those who stand in faithful opposition to the voice of that majority.

Bishop Minerva Carcaño, speaking on behalf of our Western Jurisdiction's College of Bishops, offered these words this past July:

*"And we covenant before God and you, that we will challenge statements or actions that offend, denigrate, or exclude any person because of the color of their skin, their economic circumstance, their political persuasion, their gender or their sexual orientation. We pray that we will together build the home of God's own vision and hope for God's all inclusive family."*

I imagine that it might be easy to miss the entirety of the statement as we are prone to fixate on words such as "sexual orientation" and "inclusive" conceiving that these are words that support and nurture one side of the argument. But trust me when I say that as your Bishop I am committed to defending and supporting the rights of all people, even when their "political persuasion" might be different from the majority, or even my own.

It is my belief that the future of The United Methodist Church, if it is to have one, is not to be found in dogmatic conformity to one possible expression and understanding of faithfulness. Instead, it will be discovered as we open our hearts to the pain present in world around us, our minds to revealed truth and the Spirit's continued work through the church, and our doors to all of God's beloved children. Few of the churches I visit, and even less of the people I speak with, ask me what they need to believe. Instead they want to know that I will listen, that their church cares, and that I will pray and act on their behalf in fidelity to the Gospel's call.

I will continue to pray that faithful United Methodists will not leave the church over the social and political issues that too easily divide us. What great things we could do if we channeled the same energy and passion these issues evoke toward our respective mission fields, empowering the local churches where we have been accepted and loved to do more of the same. While I cannot stop a single United Methodist from leaving our denomination, I will grieve over each brother and sister, on both sides of this issue, who makes such a choice.

As I continue to pray for both sides of this challenging issue, I ask you to do the same, and to keep me in your prayers as we each seek God's Spirit and a fullness of truth that is always beyond our understanding. Let me leave you with a few *refreshed* words of Wesley's as a blessing and a prayer.

*In the name, then, and in the strength of God, let us resolve not to hurt one another; to do nothing unkind or unfriendly to each other...*

*Let us, with God being our helper,  
speak nothing harsh or unkind of each other...*

*Let us endeavor to harbor no unkind thought, nor to allow anger or resentment  
to remain, which is contrary to tender affection...*

*Finally, let us work to help each other on in whatever we are agreed leads to  
the creation of the just society Jesus preached of. As much as possible, let's  
rejoice when we have common cause to do God's work together...*

*Above all, let us each take personal responsibility (since each must give an  
account of themselves to God) so that we do not fall short of the religion of love,  
each accountable to the Gospel they received.*

I am,  
Your affectionate servant, for Christ's sake,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Grant Hagiya', written in a cursive style.

Grant Hagiya