

October 1, 2018

Dear Church Family:

I hope this letter finds you and yours doing well and enjoying the start of Fall.

As I write to you, my heart is rejoicing in the goodness of our God. Chapin UMC continues to be in the midst of a very exciting season of ministry! The growth we are experiencing – both spiritually and numerically – is God-glorifying and Kingdom-expanding, and I am so very blessed to have a front row seat to watch God work in so many lives! Thank you for allowing me to sit in this seat.

However, I must confess that my heart is also burdened with concern for the United Methodist Church [UMC], a denomination I have been a part of for more than fifty years. The UMC in America is in crisis, and will more-than-likely face major restructuring in the coming years.

At the heart of the crisis is the UMC's struggle with issues related to human sexuality (more specifically, the practice of homosexuality), a struggle that dates back to the 1976 General Conference. The UMC's official position (stated in our Book of Discipline, the UMC's book of doctrine and polity) is found in our Social Creed, which can be viewed online at: www.umc.org. The position supports the civil rights of all persons, regardless of their sexual orientation; it speaks of the sacred worth of all persons, regardless of their sexual orientation; and it states that "*the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.*" Because some people do not agree with this statement in its entirety, there have been efforts to change the church's "incompatible" language at every General Conference since 1976; each of those efforts has failed.

These ongoing discussions and debates have splintered (and some would add, have stalled) the United Methodist denomination in America. We are distracted and divided. We need a definitive decision so that we can move forward, regaining our focus on our mission to "*make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.*"

At the General Conference of 2016, the Council of Bishops asked that a commission be formed in hopes of finding a "way forward," a solution that would end the crisis. The bishops called for a special General Conference (set for February 23-26, 2019, in St Louis), for the purpose of settling the denomination's issues related to the practice of homosexuality once and for all.

Three options have been submitted by the Commission on a Way Forward. These options (or "*plans*") will be presented and considered in St. Louis. Here is a very brief look at the three options (source: the *We Confess* Newsletter):

The Traditional Plan. This option advocates keeping the same statements regarding human sexuality as are currently in the UM Book of Discipline. However, since some bishops, pastors, conferences, boards of ministry and churches are presently in open defiance of the Discipline as it now stands, the Traditional Plan proposes to close the loopholes and tighten the accountability sections of the Discipline. This option initially desired to provide provisions for a gracious exit for any (churches and or pastors) who feel they can no longer live under the church's teaching that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching and prohibits same sex weddings and ordination of practicing homosexuals. (My understanding is that a "gracious exit" is not presently a part of any of the 3 plans.)

The Connectional Conference Plan. This option would divide the church into three separate branches of United Methodism and let each branch adopt their own Discipline, select their own bishops, adopt their own criteria for ordination and set its own standards for human sexuality. Each annual conference would decide which Connectional Conference with which to align. A local church could choose to be in a conference other than the conference with which their annual conference aligns. Clergy could identify with a particular conference or make themselves available for more than one conference. This plan would require at least 8 constitutional amendments.

The One Church Plan. This option would reverse the church's historic teaching in regard to human sexuality, and remove all references to homosexuality and to marriage as between a man and a woman. It would allow individuals, churches, and conferences to decide for themselves which standards they wish to follow. Some believe sexual morality is not an important enough issue that it should keep us from being united. Specifically, the appeal is that we must do anything we can to avoid division. This option would place United Methodism outside the Christian tradition and its teaching about marriage that has existed since New Testament days.

As it now stands, one of these three options (or a variation of one of these options) will more than likely be adopted by the General Conference in February of 2019.

So, what should we do between now and then? I suggest three action steps:

Pray our way forward. Shirley Maybin is coordinating this prayer movement in conjunction with www.UMCprays.org. There are three basic components: (1) Pause and pray from 2:23 through 2:26 AM or PM daily through the end of General Conference. (2) Participate weekly in a Wesleyan fast from Thursday after dinner through Friday afternoon. And (3) Pray daily using the prayer card in each Sunday's worship bulletin. The Chapin UMC prayer room has been updated with appropriate materials. Also, a prayer vigil will be held in our prayer chapel during General Conference (details to follow in early 2019).

In addition, we will host two Church-wide gatherings in the Chapin UMC sanctuary, the first on October 28th and the second on November 11th (Sunday afternoons) both beginning at 2:00 PM. The content of each gathering will be the same. We're offering two opportunities in hopes that one of the dates will work for you to attend. At these gatherings I will go into a bit more detail on the three options; share any new information that may have become available; answer questions related to the three options; and, most importantly, we will pray together for the future of the UMC. I hope you will be able to join us on one of those two dates.

We will pray our way forward.

Love our way forward. Love is what we as Christians are to be known for; Jesus said so in John 13:35. We are to love God with all we have and love others as we love ourselves, all of the time, especially in seasons of crisis. We here at Chapin UMC find ourselves in a unique and I believe God-ordained position: While there is much cultural and theological confusion, and while the UMC is in the throes of a denominational crisis, we are positioned to offer a clear, compelling, winsome biblical witness to the love and truth of the gospel to this community, this conference, and to the global UMC. Jesus was known to be full of grace and truth; you and I as His children should be known for the same. While we hold uncompromisingly to the truth, we are not to be unkind in how we share that truth.

While we remain orthodox in our understanding and interpretation of scripture, we are to refuse to be obnoxious towards those who do not hold to the same.

The Chapin UMC Church Council voted unanimously on September 18, 2018 to affirm a resolution supporting the current stance of the UMC. This was a loving step forward. The Council's decision helps to clear up any confusion that anyone might possibly have related to whether or not Chapin UMC is in alignment with and is abiding by the teachings of God's Holy Word and the doctrine and discipline of the UMC. We are a United Methodist congregation that is not in defiance of who and what United Methodist church polity says we are to be.

We will pray our way forward. We will love our way forward. And, we will ...

Trust God to continue to move us forward. I believe with my whole heart that God blesses churches that seek to be faithful to His vision and mission for His Church. We here at Chapin UMC, by the grace of God and only by the grace of God, have experienced His blessing through almost two decades of sustained and unparalleled growth. The blessing of God on this church is evident and undeniable. Hundreds and hundreds of lives have been and are being transformed by the grace of God. And what God has blessed in the past, I believe He will bless in the future. What may or may not happen in February must not impact what is happening in Chapin now (and it must not impact what happens after General Conference). We will simply continue to do in the future what we have done in the past. We will continue to invite all, welcome all, love all, and preach the glorious, life-giving, life-transforming gospel of Jesus Christ to all.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement, once said: "*Offer them Christ!*" That's what we at Chapin UMC will continue to do, regardless of what is decided in St. Louis, because that's what faithful churches do. And that's why we can confidently trust God to move us forward, as we pray and as we love, rejoicing in the goodness of our God every step of the way!

With Christ's Love,

Joseph D. "Jody" Flowers
Lead Pastor