



Mountain Sky Area of The United Methodist Church Mountain Sky Conference

6110 Greenwood Plaza Boulevard
Greenwood Village, CO 80111-4803

303-733-0083
bishop@mtnskyumc.org

Karen P. Oliveto
Resident Bishop

Nancy Cox
Executive Assistant

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As we edge toward a new year and a new decade, I find myself meditating on Jeremiah 29:11:

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

For myself and other LGBTQ+ United Methodists, we have learned to trust in God above all else. As the New Year rings in even greater restrictions and punishments against God’s LGBTQ+ people within our denomination, we know God’s love and grace cannot be confined by rules. It is God who, in the midst of our denominational crisis, gives us hope and a future.

This isn’t the first time we have had to stand strong in the face of the church’s injustice. Since 1972, the church has chosen to ignore Scripture, Wesleyan doctrine, science, history and medicine and turn its back on the way God’s Holy Spirit moves in the lives of LGBTQ+ people. More than 20 years ago, the Committee to Study Homosexuality recommended a revision to the Social Principles, replacing the incompatibility language with:

We acknowledge with humility that the church has been unable to arrive at a common mind on the compatibility of homosexual practice with Christian faith. Many consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. Others believe it acceptable when practiced in a context of human caring and covenantal faithfulness. The present state of knowledge and insight in the biblical, theological, ethical, biological, psychological, and sociological fields does not provide a satisfactory basis upon which the church can responsibly maintain the condemnation of all homosexual practice. The church seeks further understanding through continued prayer, study, and pastoral experience. In doing so, the church continues to affirm that God’s grace is bestowed on all, and that the members of Christ’s body are called to be in ministry for and with one another, and to the world.¹

Even though this committee did extensive study and prayerful work, the 1992 General Conference rejected the committee’s finding, choosing to maintain the injustice against LGBTQ+ people. With each successive General Conference, the restrictions have tightened, in spite of how the Holy Spirit had been moving in the world and in the lives of LGBTQ+ people. Each time the church has done so, it has done incredible harm to the souls of LGBTQ+ people and has battered and bruised the Body of Christ.

At the 1984 General Conference, the delegates to General Conference added the words, “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness” to the standards of ordained ministry. The subtext of this line was to keep gays and lesbians out of ministry. When the Judicial Council ruled that it did not prevent gays and lesbians from entering ministry, the delegates added to the Book of Discipline: “Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.”

I was already ordained a deacon and serving in my first church when this was added. I had heard my call to ministry at 11 and prepared myself for a life in service to Christ since that time. I received affirmation of that call at every stage of the ordination process. **Suddenly, the rules changed yet my call remained.** I remember being so angry and felt so helpless at the decision of General Conference. There were so many of us serving faithfully in ministry, and while our service was welcomed, our full selves were not.

I decided to write an anonymous note to “*The Circuit Rider*,” a magazine for UM clergy. It was so painful to have the church debate my life and the lives of so many others without including our voices and our experience of God in the debate. The letter was published in the July/August 1984 issue. In that letter, I wrote about life as a closeted lesbian clergywoman. I shared what it was like to come out as well as the challenges of living as a gay or lesbian person in the 1980’s:

“Straights cannot understand the pressures of being gay – what they take for granted we are said to flaunt: hand-holding, a public embrace, talking about one’s loves as one’s mate. Imagine living with that kind of stress and fear and the ever-present possibility of loss: job, family, friends, and even of bodily harm, often egged on by churches bent on “queer-bashing.”

I told why I stay in the UMC:

“I have wrestled for many years with the question of staying in the church or not. Yet, the authority of my call, which comes from God, is too strong to be denied by human-made structures.”

And I offered a challenge “to look at the sin of homophobia and to work toward a new understanding of sexuality. Together, we must be able to support and affirm those relationships of quality which are life-giving rather than life-denying.”

Thirty-five years later and we are at another critical moment in the life of the denomination. This time, it is not just LGBTQ+ persons who are impacted by the decisions of delegates at General Conference 2019. Pastors who seek to provide pastoral services to all their congregants without bias, family members of LGBTQ+ people, our young people who move in worlds that are so much more diverse and inclusive than the church, potential new members, and all United Methodists who discovered our grace-filled theology the path to loving God and neighbor have found themselves in the same situation that LGBTQ+ United Methodists have been living with for decades: struggling to remain faithful to a church that is no longer faithful to them.

To those who say, “LGBTQ+ people are still welcomed in our churches”, make no mistake: The message being conveyed to LGBTQ+ people by our official policies is that “Your kind aren’t wanted here.” For there is a difference between welcoming someone as a guest and welcoming them as a member of the family: When I visit someone’s home as a guest, I know my guest status renders some rooms of the house off-limits and I am usually confined to three places: living room, kitchen, and bathroom. But when I enter a house as family, all rooms are open to me. As long as some parts of the church – like ordination, appointment, marriage rites – are closed to LGBTQ+ people, the UMC has made us guests in a place we once called home.

I do believe that in spite of the divisions and pain caused by GC19, God is at work in our midst. There will be pastors who will not bow down to ancient prejudices and outdated understandings of sexual orientation and gender identity. They will judge candidates for ordained ministry on the basis of their gifts and graces and on the ways their ministries bear the fruits of the Spirit. They will not create second class citizens in their congregations but offer sacraments and rites to all who seek to live a life of love through Christ Jesus. Laity will continue to speak up and stand up, sharing their relationships with beloved family members who are LGBTQ+. LGBTQ+ people will continue to show up, serve, sing, and expect to be treated as an equal sibling in the household of faith.

And the miracle? In spite of human rules to the contrary, God will continue to call LGBTQ+ people into ministry in The United Methodist Church. God will make a way even when there feels as if there is no way. And the church will be better for the gifts shared by LGBTQ+ people.

I don’t think the next few months/years will be easy in the life of our church. But I trust in God. I will continue to remain faithful to this call God has placed in my heart. I will continue to serve the people of the Mountain Sky Conference and seek to deepen our discipleship and equip to create vibrant congregations. I will continue to honor the theological diversity found in our conference, acknowledging with humility that we all see but in a glass darkly (I Corinthians 13:12) and it is through our relationships with one another – particularly with those who don’t think or believe as we do – that God’s ways are revealed more clearly. I will seek to honor our differences and help us find a deeper unity in Christ.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” May we order our life together so that we all can live into the future God desires for us: one of hope and prosperity, one where no child of God is harmed, one where we all will find our place in Beloved Community.

Grace and peace,



Bishop Karen P. Oliveto

¹ Nancy C. Yamasaki, “The Committee to Study Homosexuality Offers the Church Its Report, Its Conclusions, Its Recommendations!” Circuit Rider, Dec. 1991-January 1992, 6-7.

To join us in living into the future with hope, you can support the vitality and witness of the Mountain Sky Conference by giving online so we can continue to dream big and love boldly! Donation link: www.mtnskyumc.org/dreambig