

February 28, 2019

Dear West District Clergy and Laity:

Last night I returned home from the special called General Conference in St. Louis, which was held to move the United Methodist Church forward on issues of LGBTQI inclusion.

During the week I joined with fellow West District brethren to support the One Church plan that was itself supported by the United Methodist Council of Bishops. Along with its supporters, I believed that this plan offered the most logical, reasonable and faithful way that would enable clergy and congregations to extend ministry to our LGBTQI sisters and brothers on terms with which they feel comfortable carrying out their ministries.

As you know, the decision did not go as we had expected, with the Traditional Plan being voted in favor by a majority of the voting delegates. This plan will retain the current language in the United Methodist Book of Discipline that condemns same-sex persons in language that reflects a narrow biblical context. It will continue to exclude same-sex persons from being ordained into the ministry, while also not allowing same-sex couples to be married by a United Methodist pastor or to have their marriage ceremony held in a United Methodist Church building. Overall, it will foster an atmosphere of judgment rather than grace in ministering to the LGBTQI community.

At the moment the results of General Conference are on hold. The Judicial Council of the Church (our “Supreme Court”) will review the full constitutionality of the Traditional Plan at its meeting in April. The decision to refer this matter to the Judicial Council was approved by a 51% vote of the delegates.

Aside from my personal disappointment in what transpired this week, I have been able to put these events in a context that helps me find my own way forward beyond the immediate impacts of the decision that was made this week.

As a third-generation Japanese American, I bear the legacy of the W.W. II internment camp experience which my parents and grandparents were forced to live out. Like this week’s events, their experience was the result of a decision; a decision that was grounded in exclusion, fear and hatred, rather than inclusion, acceptance and love. Like our LGBTQI brothers and sisters, my parents and grandparents were labeled as “the other,” and looked upon with second-class status (or less).

Thankfully, their harsh experience living in the camps was softened by those on the outside of the barbed wire fences who showed up to provide care and ministry to them during this three-year period of their lives. In fact, one of our West District congregations has a member whose relative taught school-kids in the camp where my own father and his family were interned, and he shares powerful stories of his relative’s experiences that were handed down to him during those dark days 77 years ago.

I will model my own “way forward” in the same way while we await the Judicial Council decision and especially afterwards, regardless of how the ruling comes down. I will continue to provide a witness of Jesus’ compassionate love to my LGBTQI brethren in whatever capacities I am able to do so. I will choose to light the candle rather than curse the darkness, trusting that the Holy Spirit will guide our Church forward in the way of the Gospel.

Remembering that “perfect love casts out fear” (I John 4:18), I will strive to find a way forward so that the LGBTQI community will ultimately experience the perfect love of Jesus Christ in the United Methodist Church.

Grace and Peace,

Reverend Mark M. Nakagawa  
West District Superintendent