

Dear friends in Christ,

Earlier this summer clergy and lay leaders from churches belonging to the Iowa City Area Circuit of the United Methodist Church to which we belong sent a letter to our new Iowa Bishop, Kennetha J. Bigham-Tsai, asking that she rectify what those of us signing the letter believed was wrong: punishing United Methodist pastors who conducted same-sex or non-binary weddings. The Bishop responded that she wanted time to discern the request. We look forward to her response.

In our letter, we asked that the Bishop and Iowa Conference of the United Methodist Church:

- reinstate, in good standing, all pastors disciplined by the church for their sexuality or actions they took on behalf of same-sex or non-binary couples who wanted to marry,
- write letters of apology to each pastor when notifying them of the reinstatements,
- and, publicly state the apologies and faith-based reasons for doing so.

“In the recent years that have taken us to this point in our denomination’s history, we have seen deep pain inflicted on some pastors who have devoted their lives to faithful thought, study, and leadership,” the letter stated. “...in the spirit of a living Triune God who witnesses his people as they change and deepen their faith, we come to you with requests we think are warranted, and which follow Christ’s example.” The actual letter is the second page of this document.

The letter is not intended to convey any congregational vote or request by the congregations in the circuit that our churches comprise. Rather, we feel that, as leaders, we should seek healing from this divisive time in our faith journey.

Limits to what the Bishop can do exist, but we also asked that she, her cabinet and other bishops push the general conference to reverse negative professional rulings against any pastor that were based on the pastor’s sexuality or actions the pastor took on behalf of same-sex couples who married, and to expunge from the pastors’ professional records such rulings and punishments.

“I will be in touch in August after I return from some renewal leave,” the Bishop wrote. “In the meantime, please know that I am keeping all of you and our whole annual conference in prayer.”

We encourage you to read the attached letter and Bishop Bigham-Tsai’s response.

Yours,

Lyle Muller, Circuit Lay Leader

P.S. to Solon UMC from Pastor Peggy—although this letter was sent in June, before I had begun as pastor here, the circuit leaders asked if I would sign. So my name is included as someone who signed the letter. Phil Kakacek, our Lay Leader from Solon UMC was not able to respond in time to officially sign the letter, but he has added his affirmation to this letter. Again, we were not signing as officially representing the congregation, since no vote was taken, but we signed as individual leaders.

June 9, 2023

Dear Bishop Bigham-Tsai,

Greetings, in the name of Christ.

It should not be surprising that the United Methodist Church is wrestling with change. This is our legacy as people of God. Abraham started lineages that brought order to God's world. Jacob wrestled with God. Ancient prophets warned about separating from God but also offered a new promise, fulfilled by Christ, who preached about a new way of entering God's realm. The apostles disagreed about spreading the Gospel to Gentiles, leading Paul to travel the Mediterranean region. Martin Luther wrote his 95 theses. The Wesleys took their itinerant ministry across the ocean. The Evangelical United Brethren and Methodist Episcopal churches merged 55 years ago. Change took place because people were trying to deepen their understanding of God. And now, the United Methodist Church is dealing with human sexuality in a way that addresses how God's people feel called to love.

In the recent years that have taken us to this point in our denomination's history, we have seen deep pain inflicted on some pastors who have devoted their lives to faithful thought, study, and leadership. Pastors have been disciplined by United Methodist conferences, including Iowa's, because of their sexuality, or because of their support of loving people who want to be married but who are of the same sex or who identify as non-binary. This was an injustice borne of polity that may or may not change. Still, a stain our United Methodist Church conference in Iowa has imposed on these Christians remains. That is why, in the spirit of a living Triune God who witnesses his people as they change and deepen their faith, we come to you with requests we think are warranted, and which follow Christ's example.

We ask that you and the Iowa Conference of the United Methodist Church:

- reinstate, in good standing, all pastors disciplined by the church for their sexuality or actions they took on behalf of same-sex or non-binary couples who wanted to marry,
- write letters of apology to each pastor when notifying them of the reinstatements,
- and, publicly state the apologies and faith-based reasons for doing so.

Beyond that, we ask that you, your cabinet and other bishops push for efforts to change United Methodist church policy so more can be done to correct what we believe are wrongs that were committed. The changes would empower the church to:

- reverse against every pastor negative professional rulings that were based on the pastor's sexuality or actions the pastor took on behalf of same-sex couples who wanted to marry,
- and, expunge from the pastors' professional records such professional rulings and punishments.

We yearn for healing as we move forward. As United Methodists, we have opportunities to reach people who seek meaning in their lives and who are curious about whether God, in whose

image we are created, can comfort them. We also are blessed with people who love God and want to minister to people as Christ taught, but who are prohibited from fulfilling their calling.

We appreciate the limits you may have under our Discipline and policies, and also all that is on your plate as you settle into Iowa life and we get to know and support your ministry. But for this, it is time. You can lead the charge for compassionate reconciliation in our church and making reparations for harms that injustice has created for God's people. Please give comfort. Help us heal.

Yours,

Pastors and Laity of the Iowa City Area Circuit

Rev. Heecheon Jeon, circuit pastors leader, 1st UMC, Iowa City
Lyle Muller, circuit lay leader, 1st UMC, North Liberty
Margaret Adams, circuit lay member, 1st UMC, North Liberty
Stacey Abel, lay circuit member, 1st UMC, Iowa City
Rev. Enna Antunez, circuit pastor, Grace UMC, Tiffin
Karyn Berlin, circuit lay member, Coralville UMC
Rev. Leigh Brown, circuit pastor, Coralville UMC
Rev. Peggy Garrigues, circuit pastor, Solon UMC
Rev. Beth Graham, circuit pastor, West Branch UMC
Rev. Alecia Hilmer, circuit pastor, 1st UMC North Liberty
Marlene Janssen, circuit lay member, Coralville UMC
Rev. Anita Johnson, circuit pastor, Sharon Center UMC
Rev. Rachel Lamparek, circuit pastor, 1st UMC, Iowa City
Brenda Mayer, circuit lay member, St. Mark's, Iowa City
Karen Miller, circuit lay member, Sharon Center UMC
Jim Olson, circuit lay member, 1st UMC, Iowa City
Michael Ryan, lay circuit member, Grace UMC, Tiffin
Barbara Wilcox, lay circuit member, West Branch UMC



**IOWA ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE
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June 27, 2023

Dear Friends,

Thank you for your heartfelt letter about addressing the harm that has been done to our LGBTQIA+ siblings. I have read it with much prayer and am discerning about how to respond. I will be in touch in August after I return from some renewal leave. In the meantime, please know that I am keeping all of you and our whole annual conference in prayer.

Blessings in Christ,

Kennetha J. Bigham-Tsai
Resident Bishop, Iowa Annual Conference