

Marriage Equality
and the
General Synod of the United Church of Christ

A Statement by
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At a time when high stakes decisions before the church set us on edge with one another and threaten to unnerve us, a beloved hymn of the German Reformed tradition calls us back to the center and grounds us in the piety that is at the heart of the Christian faith:

Jesus, I live to Thee, the loveliest and best;

My life in Thee, Thy life in me, in Thy blest love I rest.

I pray these words will shape our spirits during these next days, for the resolutions before the United Church of Christ General Synod on many issues, but especially on marriage present us with one of the most challenging decisions we have faced in recent years. For many, extending the full and equal legal rights and privileges to same gender couples as those afforded to heterosexual couples, and offering the same blessing and discipline of the church, seem entirely consistent with the over three decade long trajectory of General Synod actions and the accompanying reception process in the church. As a matter of justice and of pastoral care, affirming marriage equality would be a bold step, but one that continues a journey we have been on for a long time as a church.

On the other hand, it is clear that, for many others, use of the term “marriage” means far more than merely extending the teaching of General Synod statements one step further. For these persons, including some who have thus far supported our church’s journey with its gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members, marriage equality is a step which makes them, at the very least, profoundly uneasy. Some, including the presenters of the resolution affirming marriage as only being appropriate between a man and a woman, speak out of their own deep conviction, nurtured by their own interpretation of scripture and the tradition. Consideration of marriage equality moves us into the very center of a highly polarizing and politicized cultural debate in which United Church of Christ members find themselves disagreeing. Leaders in the church have expressed grave concern over the impact of making such a decision, including

adverse impact on OCWM and the unifying momentum of our Stillspeaking Initiative. In some cases, dire predictions have been made of congregations leaving the United Church of Christ in some of our Conferences and among some of our racial/ethnic constituencies. Never more have we needed the reminder that “our only comfort is that we belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to ourselves but to our Savior Jesus Christ.”

The cautions and concerns being raised are not insignificant. We all know that the covenants uniting this church are fragile at best. We know that there are congregations and members already in dissent from the General Synod’s earlier positions on gay and lesbian concerns. We know that there are organized groups actively seeking to encourage some of these congregations to leave the United Church of Christ. The loss of any of our congregations is wrenching, a source of sorrow for members, pastors, Conference Ministers, and national leaders alike.

We know that funding for the national and conference ministries of the United Church of Christ through Our Church’s Wider Mission is vulnerable to conflict in the church. After a period of sharp decline, particularly in National Basic Support, and our efforts this past year to move the finances of the national setting toward responsible and sustainable levels, we know that further conflict may simply create a new season of financial stress for Conferences and the national setting alike. Further, The Stillspeaking Initiative has begun to create a remarkable movement in the life of the United Church of Christ that has been able to bring together churches across the theological spectrum, including those that would identify themselves as liberal or progressive and those that would describe themselves as more conservative or traditional. Never before have we been able to bring as many of our local churches together in a common initiative, one that is clearly renewing our life together. Is this the time to inject a highly volatile debate into our common life?

However we might choose to respond to this question, the fact is resolutions appropriately submitted from both ends of the theological spectrum force us to a conversation some of us might prefer to avoid or defer. Even if the marriage resolutions were to be tabled by the General Synod, the issue has been put before us in our common life in an unavoidable way, and discussion and discernment in the life of the church will continue to challenge us. Furthermore, no church can avoid this difficult discussion in our current cultural context if it

seeks to be relevant to our society and if it seeks to be faithful particularly to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons among its members.

As General Minister and President I sense a deep calling to nurture the health of the United Church of Christ and to help create a climate of respect for diverse theological and moral perspectives. I also accept an important responsibility to tend to institutional needs in order that the distinctive voice of the United Church of Christ be heard effectively and the vitality of the various settings of the church be encouraged. I am keenly aware of the fragility of much of our church. Withdrawal from the United Church of Christ by members, local churches, or a conference would be terribly painful, diminishing us all. I am eager for the unifying momentum in our church from The Stillspeaking Initiative to continue. I know the burden that will be placed on leadership, particularly in our Conferences, should the General Synod choose to affirm marriage equality. I understand that ecumenical partners will be troubled by such an action. I recognize that persons of faith within the United Church of Christ disagree on this matter, and do so with integrity. I know all of this.

I also know that the best moments of the United Church of Christ have been when its leaders, its General Synod, or some of its congregations have been courageous rather than cautious, responding to the demands of justice as best they have been able to discern those demands on behalf of the vulnerable in our world. There is never a convenient time for such courage. Compelling arguments can and often have been made for strategic deferral or postponement, and such arguments cannot simply be dismissed as timidity. The General Synod will need to decide what is just in this matter, how our prophetic vocation is to be expressed, and how much the church can bear at this particular point in history. As General Minister and President I will faithfully interpret and implement the Synod's actions, whatever they may be, and I will give particular attention to those in our church who find themselves in dissent, perhaps even wounded by the Synod's action. At the same time, I believe the Synod has a right to know the mind of its leaders on critical issues such as this.

Here is what I believe: I believe that the General Synod should affirm the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons to have their covenanted relationships recognized by the state as marriages equal in name, privileges, and responsibilities to married heterosexual couples. I believe our local churches, as they are able, should move toward the development of

marriage equality policies so that the same liturgical and pastoral blessing and discipline may be offered all entering into covenanted relationships.

The General Synod, through sound biblical and theological reflection over many years, has affirmed the full dignity, humanity, and worth of all persons regardless of sexual orientation, an affirmation grounded in our creation in the image of God. We have called for the removal of one's sexual orientation as a barrier to ordination and to all other forms of service in the church. We understand baptism to be the foundation of one's incorporation into the body of Christ, affirming the primacy of grace over every other category of human accomplishment or failure or human status, including sexual orientation. Many of our congregations have offered blessing to same gender couples and many, if not most of our congregations, include same gender couples who are models to us of family life, including parenting. We have opposed discrimination in civil society and we believe that public policy should be informed by faith, but not controlled by the religious teachings of any one denomination or tradition in our pluralistic society. On what basis do we now draw the line between everything we have said, affirmed, and experienced and the extension of those commitments to the civil status and ecclesial rite of marriage for all, not just for some?

United Church of Christ *Book of Worship* teaches that "Marriage is a gift of God, sealed in a sacred covenant. Through that love, husband and wife come to know each other with mutual care and companionship. God gives joy. Through that joy, wife and husband may share their new life with others as Jesus shared new wine at the wedding in Cana." *Book of Worship* further says that "the scriptures teach us that the bond and covenant of marriage is a gift of God, a holy mystery in which man and woman become one flesh, an image of the union of Christ and the church." The reference to "man and woman," to "husband and wife," cannot be denied. At the same time it must be confessed that these references are as likely to represent a *description* of the relationships the biblical writers and their later interpreters saw around them as they are a timeless *prescription* of what kind of relationships are to be privileged. And it is absolutely clear that the vocation of marriage described in *Book of Worship* - to offer care and companionship, to share joy with others, and to imagine the intimate unity of Christ and the church - is a vocation that same gender couples are able to live out as faithfully and as effectively as heterosexual couples.

In addresses in conference meetings this spring in Connecticut and Southern California Nevada, I have argued that much of the societal resistance to extending marriage rights to same gender couples reflects the same history of resistance we in the United States, and in the church, have shown toward extending citizenship to the stranger, the alien, the other. Throughout our history we have found ways to limit citizenship whether it was the refusal to allow women to own titles to property or have the right to vote, whether it is our ongoing resistance to grant immigrants, migrants, and refugees work permits or naturalization documents, whether it was a system that made some among us “three fifth” citizens and, until only recently in our history, denied them voting registration cards. Even our forebears in New England argued over who should be admitted to baptism when membership in the church and citizenship in the commonwealth were nearly coterminous. Withholding a marriage certificate remains one of the few remaining ways of limiting full citizenship to some among us who are perceived to be alien or “other.” How do we square this with the frequent biblical admonition to “treat the alien in our midst as a citizen?” Not to tolerate. Not to grant second class status. But to treat as citizens.

All across this country marriage amendments have been proposed and passed which, while purporting to merely affirm traditional views of marriage, in most cases have been used to demean gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons, to vilify their relationships, and in some cases to deny or restrict their full civil rights. All across this country Christians have joined this crusade adding their own voice to words and deeds that wound many of our neighbors. A word of hope, affirmation, and grace from the church is, I believe, urgently needed in our day. If that word cannot come from the General Synod of the United Church of Christ, where else will it come from?

I recognize that we are far from being of one mind in the United Church of Christ on this issue. Even within the LGBT community there are differing perspectives. The General Synod does reflect the diversity of our church. Delegates come from hundreds of our local churches across the country in every imaginable kind of community. The Synod is “of the church,” a setting of church to be honored and respected like another other setting. Yet, it must be clear in whatever action we take that the General Synod does not claim to speak for a consensus that does not exist, that it honors and respects dissenting voices and diverse perspectives, and that it will not make its position a matter of ultimate and defining confessional character and thus

church dividing. “Jesus Christ is the head of the Church.” It is on this confession alone, in the context of our baptism and our encounter with Christ at the Table, that we find our unity. The General Synod can offer an important word, but only a word to challenge, a word to teach, a word to encourage. It must then await the reception of the church in all of its settings, reception that will lengthy and difficult. And it must offer a word expecting to hear words in return, some of which will indeed be challenging.

I understand that the Synod may choose to take a different position from the one I have articulated as my own. If it does, I hope that at the very least these core values will be affirmed: the reaffirmation of our open and affirming commitments and the commitment to the full participation of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons in the life and ministry of the church; the reaffirmation of our call for full civil rights for persons regardless of their sexual orientation; the denunciation of violence against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons in deed or word, including the passing of restrictive “marriage amendments;” the commitment to talk with our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons about marriage rather than talking about them and their relationships; and the commitment to honor diverse perspectives among our local churches, including the decisions of some local churches to perform marriages for all or to protest what they believe to be marriage inequality by refusing to perform marriages for any.

In a time of profound crisis Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that “the ultimate question for the responsible person is not how he might heroically extricate himself from the affair; the ultimate question is how the coming generation is to live?” The affair that challenged Bonhoeffer in his day is not to be equated with the question before us. But this is our affair, and it is urgent, and we should not seek to extricate ourselves from it, heroically or otherwise. At another time Bonhoeffer reminded us that discipleship has a cost even as it is joy, words that inspired our own Statement of Faith. There will be a cost if the General Synod affirms marriage equality. I am well aware of that and in some ways dread it. But there will be a cost if we don’t. Of that I am also sure. While it may not be the institution that will bear the primary cost it will, as it often is, be the marginalized and vulnerable among us who will have to bear it. Before that prospect we ought to tremble as well.

In our baptism we are claimed as “children of God, disciples of Christ, members of the church.” During our discernment at General Synod, and in the months that follow, the covenants

of our church will surely be strained by sharp disagreement. We will be tempted to take sides, to seek ideological allies, to be dismissive of those with whom we disagree. In these months ahead civility and respect will be called for, but these qualities alone will not be enough. What will be crucial is that we continually recall that like-mindedness is not the basis of our life together in the Church of Jesus Christ, but rather the remembrance of our common baptism. It will also be crucial to remember Paul's admonition that the eye, simply because it is different from the hand or the foot, must never say, "I have no need of you." The great witness of the church is that in Christ diversity need not divide and unity does not require uniformity. In the United Church of Christ we honor these reminders, respecting difference, making space for disagreement. Yet this witness is always made in the context of a culture that seeks to divide, to place us over against each other, to name winners and losers. I believe support for marriage equality will be an important witness to our society. Perhaps even more important is demonstrating that fragmentation is not the inevitable result of difference, that our baptismal vocation can join truth and love in ways that the world can scarcely imagine.

I write this after much thought, conversation, and prayer. I believe God has led me to the convictions I have articulated, convictions I could scarcely have imagined when I was ordained thirty years ago. It has been a surprising but an enormously enriching journey. So I stand in this place with confidence, but I also write knowing that faithful colleagues will disagree, that there will be painful consequences for all of us in any of the actions we may take. Therefore I can only rest on the faith of our forebears, expressed in the beautiful words of the Evangelical Catechism, "Lord Jesus to thee I live, to thee I suffer, to thee I die. Lord Jesus, thine will I be in life and in death."

A contemporary hymn that has come to be loved by many speaks to a people "in the midst of new dimensions, in the face of changing ways." The closing stanza places the challenge and the hope of this moment in our life before us:

Should the threat of dire predictions cause us to withdraw in pain?

May your blazing phoenix spirit resurrect the church again.

God of rainbow, fiery pillar, leading where the eagles soar,

We your people, ours the journey, now and ever, now and ever, now and evermore.

Thus we approach the Synod, anxious for ourselves and for our church, but ultimately assured,

and perhaps even grateful that in a time when churches often seem preoccupied with much that is trivial, God has placed a matter of such human significance before us. As with other fearful moments before in the life of the United Church of Christ, one day this may prove not to have been a curse, but a blessing.