



The United Methodist Church
The Philadelphia Area Episcopal Office

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Pastoral Letter in Response to UM Judicial Council Decisions 1378 and 1379 from Bishop Peggy Johnson

I bid you grace and peace in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns forever.

The long-awaited ruling from the Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church arrived today. Our denomination has three branches of government: executive (Council of Bishops), legislative (General Conference) and judicial (Judicial Council). After our 2019 Special Session of General Conference in February, in St. Louis, the Council of Bishops as well as General Conference asked for rulings from the Judicial Council as to the constitutionality of certain decisions.

The Traditional Plan had been vetted by the Judicial Council in the fall of 2018, and several petitions were deemed unconstitutional. These dealt with Episcopal authority (3 petitions), Board of Ordained Ministry Composition (3 petitions), and full examination of candidates for ordained ministry (1 petition). There were two others that were not dealt with. They were held back by the standing committee on General Conference.

However, there are several parts of the approved Traditional Plan that the Judicial Council has deemed constitutional. They include:

- Â• an expansion of what it means to be "self-avowed and practicing" homosexual;**
- Â• penalties for being found guilty of committing a chargeable offense; and**
- Â• prohibitions preventing bishops from consecrating new bishops or commissioning or ordaining candidates for ministry who are self-**

avowed and practicing homosexuals.

In addition, there is a prohibition against District and Conference boards of Ordained Ministry approving and recommending candidates who are not qualified after a full examination. A bishop must rule such recommendations out of order.

Finally, there are several petitions that involve the complaint process, which must be handled strictly according to our laws and with care for the complainant's concerns. Any "just resolution" must address the harm that has been caused.

The Judicial Council ruled today that all of the above constitutional sections are constitutional still, and they will become part of the Discipline on January 1, 2020, for conferences in the U.S., and 12 months after the May 2020 General Conference for Central Conferences. Constitutional sections of petitions are not disqualified because they were bundled along with other sections that are unconstitutional, according to the council's ruling.

The other important ruling concerned the minority report's substitution for the Taylor Disaffiliation Plan. This plan gives churches a chance to leave the denomination based on theological incompatibility until December 31, 2023. But their departure is dependent on a two-thirds (2/3) vote of the professing church members approving the exit; and on settling any unpaid debts or apportionments (worked out with the conference trustees, superintendents and finance office); and on payment of a fee to the pension system. The Judicial Council added to this petition that the Annual Conference must vote by a simple majority to allow churches to disaffiliate. If all of these requirements are met the church may keep its building and assets and leave the denomination.

For some, these rulings will be deeply disappointing and a sign of our division and ongoing theological and interpersonal struggles. For others, this is a victory and a sign of hope. Whenever a house is divided it is a call to prayer. Only the Holy Spirit of God can keep unity among us during this journey.

It is my prayer that we will continue to work for the vision of making disciples and the mission of transforming the world. We live in a pivotal time in the life of this denomination. How will future generations look at us when they reflect on our actions and decisions? Were we loving? Was this necessary? Were we kind to each other?

Let us remember the future as we move forward. I stand ready to be in dialogue with any church, organization or district that would like to have constructive conversations with me. Clarity and unity often come when we seek to hear the hearts of each other in humble relationship building. Let us strive to be prayerful and peaceful-even positive-as we continue to chart the way forward for our beloved denomination. May God continue to bless you and your congregations as you persist and prevail in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Peggy A. Johnson

Bishop Peggy A. Johnson

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