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Open Letter to the Northern Illinois Conference

November 19, 2013

The action and responses to the Council of Bishops's statement regarding Bishop Mel Talbert's celebration of a marriage between Joe Openshaw and Bobby Prince in Alabama have been like the other Sunday afternoon when turbulent weather swirled across the state of Illinois. While the literal storms have subsided, the spiritual, ecclesial, theological, and relational storms caused by the statement of the Council of Bishops continue within each of us, between us, and around us as people called United Methodist in the Northern Illinois Conference and across the church.



Bishop Sally Dyck

The storms brewed up for me at the Council of Bishops. There was a strong, but not unanimous, belief that Bishop Talbert's actions necessitated their response because he went into another bishop's territory after the expressed wish that he not do so. This became the dominant topic of discussion. But some voted against the statement, including myself, because it keeps making less and less space to be faithful followers of Jesus and loving family members, friends, pastoral leaders, and yes, even bishops.

As I have already stated publicly, the good thing about the [COB's statement](#) is that it finally recognizes that we are not of one mind on human sexuality. This is a long overdue statement. But in making this statement, there needs to be space for people to exist, live, thrive, grow, and fulfill their calling as laity and clergy within the church. If it was just a handful of dissidents in the church who disagreed with the Book of Discipline, that would be one thing. But those of us who need space comprise at least, if not more than, half the American population and increasingly more and more people within and throughout the church.

Not allowing space for people who long for an open church is counter-productive to fulfilling our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ. The church and its leaders long for "more people, younger people, and more diverse people." But with "more people, younger people (and not so young), and more diverse people" come people for whom the matters of human sexuality aren't a stumbling block in faith but quite the contrary. When we aren't open and welcoming of all people, our statements on human sexuality are an impediment, causing many within the church to become disappointed in the UMC and to feel that we are being hypocritical in what Jesus would have us be and do. We need space so we can grow and be vital.

I also understand that there are some in the Northern Illinois Annual Conference who believe that the Council of Bishops acted appropriately, based on deeply held convictions. While there

are some of you who don't want the church to budge an inch, I also know there are others of you who are weary of this longtime, ongoing division.

Instead of framing this as an either-or position that necessitates either-or responses, can we reframe it? Can we figure out how to negotiate space for all to exist in the church for the purpose of fulfilling our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ?

In Acts 15, the early church found itself in a conflict over the law as well as accepted and deeply held assumptions and traditions about who people are (circumcised or uncircumcised). It was a visceral reaction by some against Paul and others who were reaching out to the (uncircumcised) Gentiles. They stood on the side of the law but the church found a way to be together that seemed to work. I don't think it changed all the hearts and minds of the Jewish Christians but at least it wasn't impeding the outreach to the Gentiles. (Please read the chapter to see what they did and how they did it.)

I love this annual conference. But I don't want our annual conference, which is made up of diverse but divided beliefs on human sexuality, to exhaust our resources of time, focus, energy and money (up to \$100,000 if it goes to a trial) on filing complaints against clergy who are following their conscience. Frankly, I don't want my resources of energy and focus to be exhausted by people filing complaints against each other or me. I will be announcing in the near future some evening, open gatherings where we can discuss how we can reframe this conversation, based on Acts 15.

I want us to find a negotiated way forward so that we can love our neighbors as ourselves. In addition to my concern and care for the inclusiveness of the church in terms of human sexuality, I also want the Northern Illinois Conference to love our neighbors who are immigrants as we become more immigrant-friendly. I want us to love our neighbors by engaging our communities which are gripped by poverty whether it's in the city of Chicago or the most rural church in the conference. I want us to spend our time and energy to start new churches, including people who are already open and welcoming to LGBTQ people or are so designated themselves and desire the love and grace of Jesus Christ just as we do. I want us to love our neighbors by eliminating deaths from malaria. I want us to focus our time, energy and money as an annual conference in reaching out, loving our neighbor, and fulfilling our mission.

For the six times it mentions homosexuality in the scriptures, repeatedly Jesus called us to love one another and Paul admonished the early church to be as one (in the New Testament alone the word love appears over 200 times). When he mentioned being of the same mind, I don't think he meant being of the same mind on any particular topic, including human sexuality; I think he meant being of the same mind in following Jesus, loving our neighbor and caring for one another.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 2:1-5)

~Bishop Sally Dyck

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Northern Illinois Conference | 77 W. Washington St., Suite 1820 | Chicago | IL | 60602