

**For the Sake of the Church
A Statement in the Aftermath of the Special Session**

The purpose of the Connectional Table is to discern and articulate the vision for the church and the stewardship of the mission, ministries, and resources of The United Methodist Church as determined by General Conference and in consultation with the Council of Bishops.

The Connectional Table is a forum for vision and implementation composed of members from all jurisdictions and central conferences in the worldwide connection. The desire is to make sure that all voices are represented around the table and are heard in the conversation about the mission and ministry of the Church.

We share this message with the Connectional Table to lead into reflection and conversation about how we as a forum for conversation about the mission and ministry of the church can best serve the denomination in the current situation after the called session of general conference.

Just 39 days ago, our General Conference met in St. Louis, Missouri. By a 54-vote margin, we approved the Traditional Plan, which stiffens enforcement of the current prohibitions against same sex marriage and commissioning and ordination of gay clergy. As a result of that decision, some have experienced relief. Others have experienced disappointment and pain. Many of our LGBTQIA+ siblings have expressed that our decision in St. Louis deeply wounded them. They experienced it as a rejection of their very selves.

As your chair and as your CCMO, we mourn the ways in which we, as the General Conference, at times fell short of the love and respect for one another we should have shown and took to hurting each other with our words, attitudes and actions. We are mindful that watching this happen was painful to all of us, especially to our LGBTQIA+ family members. We want to say to our LGBTQIA+ siblings, we affirm your worth as children of God, as members of the family of Christ. We value you, and we value your gifts for ministry. You are welcome here.

We lament the brokenness of our church. We lament that we have been fighting each other for decades over how we are to be in ministry with people whose self-identity is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, or asexual. We have been fighting for decades over differing understandings and interpretations of Scripture.

We have been fighting. And whatever we as individuals believe about Biblical authority or about same sex marriage, it is a reality that all of our fighting has been destructive of our body, of our witness, and of the very real human beings who are caught up in our fighting.

In spite of much prayer and spiritual centering in worship, the General Conference was a very public witness that we have gone to legislative and ideological war with one another. It was a public witness that we have picked up weapons and used them against one another. It was a public witness that we have damaged our own body.

And we have damaged the witness of the church. Perhaps you have seen the newspaper articles, some about charges of voter fraud. Friends, this is the witness of a church that does not belong to

us. It is the witness of the church of Jesus Christ that we have damaged. It is his body that we have harmed with our fighting.

Lord, have mercy upon us.

In the midst of all of the conflict and pain, one thing became clear at the Special Session. We are divided and may not be able to reconcile our differences with integrity. The conflict and division are likely to continue. Already, clergy, especially within the U.S., have pledged to resist by performing same sex marriages. We know that Boards of Ordained Ministry have pledged to continue to recommend candidates for commissioning and ordination, no matter their sexual orientation. We have heard of clergy members turning in their orders, of churches and annual conferences ready to stop paying apportionments or to leave the denomination entirely, of seminaries questioning their United Methodist affiliation, of annual conferences, a whole U.S. jurisdiction, and of a European central conference making statements of resistance. It is clear to us that this division did not and will not end with the vote in St. Louis. There will be no peace.

The Book of Jeremiah notes these words in Jeremiah 6:14:

“They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. ‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace.”

As your chair and as your CCMO, we cannot go along with business as usual and ignore the woundedness of our church. We cannot say, “Peace, Peace,” when there is no peace. And, we believe that there is no peace in this current situation, because the Special Session revealed differences that are deeper than differing opinions about human sexuality. We believe that what was revealed at the Special Session were very different visions for what it means to be the church in mission. Fundamental to our impasse are not only differing hermeneutics but also differing ecclesiologies and missiologies.

As much as we have both worked our entire ministries for the unity of the church, we believe that, because of these fundamental differences, there can be no unity as we have understood and practiced it in the past. We believe that we need to acknowledge the conversations happening throughout our connection about ways to go forward in ministry, perhaps even along separate paths.

Lord, have mercy upon us.

Friends, we want to envision a future for the church that is marked by a sustainable peace. A peace that is not built upon clear, broad-based support (no matter which plan would have passed), is not sustainable. The continued fighting is not sustainable.

So, our question for you today is how do we get to a place of peace? How do we honor our beliefs and values in a way that brings peace? How are we going to be able to respect one another despite our differing ways of thinking? How are we going to hold onto our own convictions without trampling on the convictions of another? How are we going to be able to look each other in the eye and bless each other as fellow children of God?

At the heart of these questions is a desire for a solution that brings peace and the freedom to move into the future with integrity.

We believe that to achieve this kind of future requires that we define a unity that is based in our common Wesleyan tradition and in our common commitment to the mission field, but that is not necessarily defined organizationally, structurally or in our polity. We are not suggesting any specific plan. We are instead pointing to the need to move forward in ways that address the current reality of our church. So, we are here to plead with the church:

- We plead with the church, in this season of Lent, to enter with us into confession, repentance for our fighting and for ways we have wounded each other, and into deep prayer.
- We plead with the church to enter into reflection on our ecclesiology and our missiology. How can we describe in non-judgmental terms the differing visions for the church and its mission that were operative at the Special Session? How might our United Methodist scholars help us better define our ecclesiology and missiology in ways that free us all for ministry?
- We plead with the church to enter into reflection on our history, in particular the creation of The United Methodist Church in 1968 and the ending of the Central Jurisdiction. How might this coming together in a more just form inform us at a time when perhaps new structures must be born?
- We plead with the church to enter into reflection on our polity and ways in which our governance helps or hinders us at this sensitive time in the life of our denomination. How might our polity be used in good faith to free us all for the mission fields in which we have been placed and to which we have been called?
- We plead with the church to enter into conversations within, between and across all boundaries. We encourage the inclusion of our LGBTQIA+ siblings, members from across the worldwide connection and our ecumenical partners in these conversations. We encourage the inclusion of our young people and of people of color. Such conversations, some of which are already taking place, can bring to the table women and men, clergy and laity, those with power and those without power.
- We plead with the church to enter into a conversation that is based in the reality of our situation but that ultimately points toward hope. This is a seminal moment in the life of our church. If we choose, it does not have to be a moment of destruction. It can be a generative moment in which we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit and to the new thing that God might do in and through us.

The conversations we are suggesting must incorporate the wisdom of the institution while acknowledging that the institution has in many ways failed us. Indeed, as representatives of the institutional church, we know that the answers will not come from us. But we do have a role. We can seek to come alongside with conversations that are already happening and bring the reflections and ideas we may have as a connectional body gathering voices from across the worldwide denomination. We can acknowledge the conversations that are already happening

and create space for such conversations—space that will hold us in the creative tension that can take us forward while preventing the implosion of our denomination into chaos.

We are not calling for another Commission. We are pleading for conversation and reflection in search of an amicable solution. And we are wondering if the Connectional Table, in its role as a body that discerns and articulates vision, that stewards the mission, ministry and resources of our denomination, might begin to connect and encourage such conversations, acknowledging that these conversations are already happening. We are wondering if the CT can help to broker conversations and connect the people with whom we have relationships. We are wondering if we can help provide that “vital web of interactive relationships” that is the very essence of our worldwide connectionalism.

We also are pleading with the CT to honestly grapple with the impact of the Special Session on our own work. In particular, given our role in ensuring the missional effectiveness of our general agencies, we encourage discussion within the CT about the very real vulnerabilities of our general agencies and their ministries in this uncertain environment.

In the spirit of the season of Lent, we invite you into reflection on Psalm 51: 1-12 and into a time of confession and silent prayer. We will share with you the psalm and invite you into reflective silence for 15 minutes. Then, we will invite you into honest conversation about the issues we have raised, your thoughts and feelings; your hopes and dreams. We want to know what you think we can offer our church in the reality of this moment.