

Living in the Wilderness

Dulin United Methodist Church is living in the wilderness. Since 1972, some 47 years ago, United Methodists have had conversations about the full inclusion of LGBTQIA persons in the life of the United Methodist Church. Several mainline denominations have already dealt with this issue, resulting in painful splits. Recently the United Methodist Church held a Special General Conference to deal with issues of human sexuality, specifically that of same sex marriage and the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexual persons.

Unique to The United Methodist Church, we are connected globally, and also within the United States. There are 12.8 million United Methodists around the globe. There are 32,000 United Methodist congregations in the United States, one or more in almost every city and county. There are over 44,000 United Methodist churches worldwide, surpassing the number of McDonald's franchises. When we gather to conference, we are more like the United Nations, coming from various cultures, races, and contexts of ministry. Issues such as human sexuality become very difficult to find agreement on.

At the conference, four plans of action were presented for consideration; two garnered substantial support, the Traditional Plan and The One Church Plan. The Traditional Plan retained restrictive language and policies that relate to same sex marriage and ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexual persons and included disciplinary measures when such policies were violated by pastors and bishops. The One Church Plan gave regional bodies, congregations, and clergy greater flexibility to make decisions based on individual and communal convictions. This plan met the needs of specific ministry contexts without changing the connectional nature of The United Methodist Church. After much time, money (\$4 million dollars), conversation and debate, the General Conference voted 438-384 (53%-47%) to approve the Traditional Plan.

I was an advocate of the One Church Plan. With the action of the General Conference, the global United Methodist Church has chosen not to fully embrace the gifts and lives of our LGBTQIA disciples and friends. What could have been a holy, sacred, and sacramental opportunity turned into an act of rancorous debate and political maneuvering with winners and losers. This has been very painful, not only for me, but for many clergy and parishioners. I desire a church that is diverse and open, representing the communities I serve. God's grace is available to everyone. Jesus' love is UNCONDITIONAL. Yet, with this decision, The United Methodist Church, while saying LGBTQIA persons are of "sacred worth", is also devaluing them, treating LGBTQIA persons as second class disciples, allowing them to serve and lead in limited ways. As pastor of Dulin Church, I am called to serve all parishioners. There are some who disagree with my views, but we are called to love and support one another.

Dulin Church has been in ministry in Falls Church and the surrounding community for 150 years. It has significant outreach and mission ministries through its dollars, words, and actions. The congregation met, prayed, and learned about the issues before this General Conference. Many hoped for a decision that embraced diversity and inclusivity. With this decision, there is pain, disappointment and hurt. One parishioner said it best, "I'm mad at the Methodist Church." Dulin Church is a welcoming community opening its doors to all who enter with acceptance and love. As a church that wishes to be more expansive in our ministry to LGBTQIA persons in Falls Church and beyond, many have grown weary of the restrictions that

are continually placed upon ministry opportunities. There are Dulin disciples who concurred with the decision, and their viewpoints have been respected and acknowledged.

In conversations with leaders, parishioners, and staff, many came to realize that their views and understandings of human sexuality are not what keep them centered and connected to one another as a church. Christ through his life, ministry, death, and resurrection- is the center and the sole fundamental of faith.

What is our next step? Some may leave Dulin Church and find a United Methodist Church more suitable for them. We may lose disciples to other denominations down the street. Some may just quit the church. A significant number of Dulin Church disciples desire to stay in the denomination, continuing to work towards inclusion for all persons. Some United Methodist Churches are pondering whether to leave the denomination. This is an issue that is not going away.

We are reminded in this season of Lent that Jesus was sent into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit for forty days to discover his call, mission, and identity. Dulin Church believes that the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives to sustain, guide, direct, inspire, and strengthen us to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Dulin Church is a thriving, inclusive, and diverse congregation, and we are willing to stay in the wilderness, seeking God's love and mercy, ready to follow wherever we are led.

the Rev. Dr. M. Davies Kirkland,
Pastor of Dulin Church, 19 years