



## GREAT PLAINS ANNUAL CONFERENCE of The United Methodist Church

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Sisters and brothers of the Great Plains Conference and the United Methodist Church:

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Grace and peace to you from God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

At the 2019 General Conference in St. Louis, 53 percent of more than 820 delegates present voted to uphold the Book of Discipline's doctrine of marriage as between a man and woman, the harmful language singling out homosexuality as being incompatible with Christian teaching, the prohibition against clergy officiating same-gender weddings, and the restrictive language regarding the ordination of LGBTQ persons. The definitions, identification, and language regarding the practice of homosexuality was further strengthened, as were the deterrent sanctions for officiating same-sex weddings. The General Conference also voted to increase accountability to the Book of Discipline by the bishops and members of Boards of Ordained Ministry. Lastly, delegates voted to pass a streamlined process for disaffiliation over issues related to human sexuality. Some of these petitions are under review by the Judicial Council because that body previously had ruled them in violation of the UMC Constitution in the Book of Discipline. The Judicial Council ruling is not expected until its meeting in April.

U.S. Methodist delegates on both sides of the human sexuality issue worked hard leading up to General Conference. Traditionalists worked to prevent the church's current stance in the Book of Discipline about homosexuality from changing while tightening accountability and creating an exit pathway for churches that consider leaving the denomination over issues related to human sexuality. Progressives worked hard toward changing the church's current stance on human sexuality in the hope of coming to an agreement on our unity in mission without uniformity of practice regarding the inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the whole life of the church.

Both sides convened at this year's 2019 General Conference for the purpose of determining a way forward in unity, mission, and ministry. In our hands was the opportunity and authority to amplify and deepen our communion with each other and our mission in the world by helping each other realize our hopes while uniting with each other. Instead, we used our opportunity and authority to further constrain, abuse, and cut each other off. We used our speeches as flaming arrows against one another, our voting ballots as bullets. We failed to reach a compromise as Christ's followers and United Methodists. We failed to be one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet.

"What have we done to each other? What have we done to the Church? Where do we go from here?"

To the churches that have been welcoming and safe places for our LGBTQ sisters and brothers, continue to do so. Now more than ever, continue to offer the balm of God's means of grace to the wounded LGBTQ persons, their families, and friends through worship, prayer, healing rites, Christian fellowship, the study of scripture that reveals the love of God, and through your compassionate accompaniment and support. To the churches with traditional values, continue to strengthen and encourage your families, teaching them to love and serve the Lord as a household of faith and their neighbor as themselves. There is no commandment greater than these. (Joshua 24:15; Mark 12:31)

Lent could not have come at a better time for all of us. We are in a strange and disorienting place in our life together as United Methodists, and yesterday's maps and plans seem inadequate to lead us forward. The Spirit calls us to pause at this time and lay down our weapons, unclench our fists, and turn toward each other. The Spirit calls us to acknowledge and repent of the harm we have inflicted upon each other, to lament how we have marred our witness for Christ, and to ask forgiveness for how we have willfully traumatized our connections and missions in the world as a denomination. Christ, our Good Shepherd, calls us to rest our weary souls and find healing for our wounded spirits.



Let us take time this Lenten season for corporate and individual prayer, self-examination, and reflection before taking our next steps as individuals or congregations out of bitterness, anger, woundedness, despair, or a spirit of vengeance and unforgiveness. Let us ask God to impute in us the spiritual grace of humility we need to live by the Spirit and be guided by the Spirit in the ways of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22).

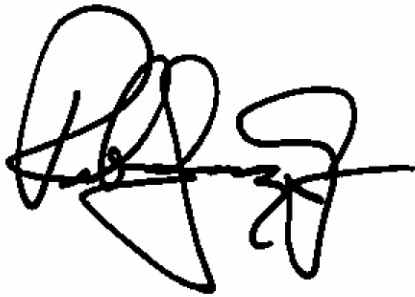
Friends, we are still God's people in all of our diversity, not because we have voted to belong, but because Jesus Christ has decided the issue for us. He emptied himself of his glory and became one of us, taking the form of a servant. He forgave us, saved us, healed us, and taught us that we can be better. He became obedient to the point of death on a cross and made us part of the forever family of God through his life, death, and resurrection. Christ promises never to reject, cast out, turn away, or drive away all those who come to him (John 6:37).

It will get darker before the dawn of new life and resurrection breaks upon us. I am convinced that we are not alone. Christ walks the Via Dolorosa with us amid our strife. This Lent, let us open our closed and wounded hearts to Jesus Christ for healing and transformation. Let us look to Christ in our midst, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, until everything else between us recedes, allowing his work through us to become the one and only thing that is vital between us. Let us turn to each other in our season of woundedness for the sake of the people in our communities who have yet to experience the abundance of Christ's redeeming love and indwelling presence. Let us acknowledge with a broken spirit and a broken and contrite heart that we need God's deliverance and that we need each other. We are more with each other in all of our diversity than we are without each other.

I promise to give myself to working for the peace, unity, and mission of the United Methodist Church in the Great Plains Conference and the greater United Methodist Church in the world while being mindful and actively responsive to not cause more harm. I will unintentionally make mistakes and disappoint many along the way, so I ask for your forgiveness in advance. I will pray for you and ask that you pray for me.

Come Holy Spirit, come and put a new and right spirit within us.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ruben Saenz Jr.', written in a cursive style.

Bishop Ruben Saenz Jr.  
Great Plains Conference  
The United Methodist Church