



UNITED METHODIST “DECLARATION OF INCLUSION” MOVEMENT SPREADS NATIONWIDE – SAME-SEX MARRIAGES WELCOME IN RAPIDLY GROWING NUMBER OF CHURCHES

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Starting in Sacramento, congregation leaders and members of numerous United Methodist Churches in the western United States are “declaring inclusion” for same-sex unions in their churches in rapidly growing numbers. This is a recent development of an expanding national movement to challenge the denomination’s exclusionary rules toward Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) people.

At a news conference, spokespeople for several congregations that have adopted the “Declaration of Inclusion” described an initiative that is now spreading like wildfire, not just throughout the West but nationally. The Declaration is a statement by the church members themselves—speaking through their Church Councils—that their church facilities are open to same-sex weddings and holy unions (copy attached). It directly confronts the language in the denomination’s *Book of Discipline* that prohibits the use of facilities for such ceremonies and also prohibits pastors from performing them.

Since early 2014, the number of churches adopting the Declaration of Inclusion has risen from the three Sacramento-area churches where it originated (St. Mark’s UMC, Elk Grove UMC, and Fair Oaks UMC) to almost 50 in seven states—California, Nevada, Arizona, Washington, Oregon, Colorado, and Illinois. Most of the expansion has taken place since mid-February as word of the Declaration spread widely. Churches in states beyond the western region are now considering adoption of this Declaration.

Accompanied by members of Sacramento-area churches that adopted the Declaration, lay leaders of several churches addressed the news conference. Pointing to the inclusion of LGBT people at St. Mark's, Reconciling Ministries co-chair Otto DeLeon noted that "Support of same-sex marriage and promoting access to our worship facilities for LGBTI marriage ceremonies are logical next steps in following the teachings outlined in the Bible." Susan Hunn, co-founder of the Reconciling Ministry in the El Dorado County Federated Church, said, "When the people of the church declare that we embrace marriage for all, it becomes personal. It's not a theory or a principle; it's a daughter, a nephew, the kid next door."

Elk Grove Lay Leader Mark Hedlund noted that the number of churches adopting the Declaration has exploded in recent weeks. He said the Declaration is not a statement about disobeying church law, but rather about "choosing to obey the HIGHER law of the Gospel...the higher law that calls us to be loving and compassionate of everyone, the higher law that calls us to include ALL of God's people into our care." Retired UMC Pastor Don Fado, who worked with the organizers, said this initiative goes beyond the leadership of pastors who have already challenged the church's discriminatory rules. It is the "voice of the lay people, the voice of the church members" who, by nearly unanimous votes in every church council, seek to "proclaim the good news of God's love for all regardless of sexual orientation."

Churches signing the Declaration of Inclusion are also moving forward on the next step in their commitment to make the United Methodist Church a truly open church that welcomes all people. The rules of the United Methodist Church can only be changed by the international General Conference of the church, which next meets in 2016. In the meantime, a resolution from many churches signing the Declaration of Inclusion is being prepared for presentation to the regional body, the California-Nevada United Methodist Annual Conference, which meets in June 2014 in Sacramento. This resolution will also be considered by other regional conferences.

The Resolution will affirm that within the Annual Conference, the *Discipline's* mandates of inclusion for people of varying sexual orientations shall take precedence over the mandates of exclusiveness. For example, the mandate for "families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends" takes precedence over the rule that prohibits "Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions...conducted by our ministers and...in our churches."

In addition, the resolution urges that no charges be brought against anyone for either accepting same-sex unions at their church, or rejecting them. In the life of the church, the resolution affirms that United Methodists can disagree yet continue to love and respect one another.

NOTE: Declaration of Inclusion website is: <http://declareinclusionumc.wordpress.com/>

DECLARATION OF INCLUSION Text

We, The (insert name of governing body) _____
 of (insert name) _____ United Methodist Church
 declare that no one will be denied the services of our church because of sexual orientation.
 This includes the use of our property for same-sex marriages and holy unions.

This action is in accordance with the United Methodist Book of Discipline which states:

- “inclusiveness denies every semblance of discrimination” (¶140)
- “We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God” (¶161f)
- “All persons, regardless of age, gender, marital status or sexual orientation are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured” (¶161f)
- “We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends”. (¶161f)

Therefore, we commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons because we understand that each individual is of sacred worth. We do this in a spirit of biblical obedience as we practice the radical hospitality of Jesus Christ.

Background: Current United Methodist Church (UMC) policy, as outlined in the *Book of Discipline*, states, “We do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” (¶161.f) “Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches. (¶341.6)

Following the 2012 General Conference, 15 regional conferences passed resolutions in support of same-sex marriage and against the UMC’s current position on homosexuality and marriage. Others said they would express support for a “statement of gospel obedience” that declares the UMC to be in error for its position against homosexuality.

In July 2012, the Western Jurisdictional Conference affirmed that God’s grace and love is available to all persons and asserted that the UMC is in error on the subject of “homosexuality’s incompatibility with Christian teaching.” The Conferences of the Jurisdiction were invited “to operate as if the ‘incompatible’ statement in ¶161F does not exist.”

Nothing in this declaration shall infringe upon ¶340.3.a of the *Discipline*: “The decision to perform the (marriage) ceremony shall be the right and responsibility of the pastor.”

SPEAKER STATEMENTS – DECLARATION OF INCLUSION NEWS CONFERENCE

March 10, 2014

Good morning and welcome. My name is **Mark Hedlund**, and I'm a lay leader here at the Elk Grove United Methodist Church.

Standing before you are members representing 14 congregations from Northern California and Nevada. We are here in solidarity to show our unwavering support of equal rights for all in the United Methodist Church. And we are here to send a strong, clear message that 'equal rights for all' means regardless of sexual orientation.

This is a time of turmoil in our church. The United Methodist Church Book of Discipline, which is the governing rule book and the law for 12 million United Methodists around the world, includes language that states: the practice of homosexuality is not condoned, is incompatible with Christian teaching, and that ceremonies of same-sex unions shall not be conducted in our churches or by our ministers.

This language is not just problematic, it is not just uncomfortable. We stand together as United Methodists to say this language IS WRONG, it is abject discrimination, and WE WILL NOT ABIDE BY IT.

Several months ago, three Sacramento-area churches adopted a Declaration of Inclusion, stating that no one will be denied services of our churches because of sexual orientation, and that we will open the doors of our churches to be used for ceremonies of same sex marriages and holy unions. From small beginnings, we're announcing today that this Declaration of Inclusion is exploding into a nationwide movement, now adopted by 49 United Methodist Congregations in seven states ... and growing.

This comes at a time when several United Methodist ministers have faced church trials and penalties for performing same-sex weddings and holy unions. In fact, Reverend Thomas Ogletree was to go on trial today in the New York Conference for officiating at his son's wedding to another man. (Update per news announcement.)

So we are not stopping with the Declaration. We are also drafting a resolution to bring forward at the California-Nevada Annual Conference where nearly 400 United Methodist churches are represented. We'll talk more about that in a moment.

The church law is contradictory. On the one hand it denies equal rights and equal service to the lesbian, gays, bisexual and transgender individuals ... and in other sections it states that members of the LGBT community shall not be rejected or condemned, and are "entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured."

We choose to uphold the latter, to uphold the rules of grace, love and compassion ... and to reject the rules that are exclusionary and judgmental. Some will say as we stand here that we are disobeying church law. What we say, is that we're choosing to obey the HIGHER law of the Gospel ... the higher law that calls us to be loving and compassionate of everyone, the higher law that calls us to include ALL of God's people into our care.

There is no asterisk that says, "oh yeah, except for people who are different than you, or who might make you feel uncomfortable."

Jesus reached out to those who were not fully accepted by others during his time. He did not create second-class citizens. And as followers of Christ's teaching, neither shall we.

My name is **Don Fado**. I am a retired United Methodist minister who had the privilege of being a convener of the joint committee from 3 local churches which wrote the Declaration of Inclusion. While clergy are involved in the declaration, it is clearly expressing the voice of the church membership. The church councils made up predominately of lay people have voted for the declaration in 50 churches. While hundreds have voted for it, there have been only 3 opposing votes. Over 99% of those voting have affirmed the declaration.

We want to shout this to the roof tops. We will not treat LGBTQ people as second class citizens. These churches are open for business: the business of spreading God's love therefore they will not reject people due to sexual orientation and send them elsewhere.

The Discipline, our rule book, speaks out of both sides of its mouth. On one side it speaks eloquently about inclusion: "We shall not reject gays and lesbians." and yet out of the other side it says we reject any use of our property or clergy to have a service of same sex marriage or union.

In June we are submitting a resolution to our Annual Conference which is the regional legislative body, proclaiming that the rules of our church mandating inclusiveness shall take precedence over those that call for rejection or exclusion. We are committed to the mandates of inclusion, therefore we cannot follow rules that call for exclusion and rejection. We refuse to be intimidated by unjust rules and the threat of trials to force everyone to conform to injustice in a church which traditionally has not required conformity, a church committed to justice.

It is time for this clergyperson to step aside so we can clearly hear the voice of the laity.

Same Sex Unions Celebrated & Embraced

My name is **Otto DeLeon**. I represent the lay leadership at St. Mark's United Methodist church.

Our sponsorship of the joint "declaration of inclusion" initiative is a public statement of approval for same-sex wedding ceremonies to be celebrated and performed on the St. Mark's church campus. For some congregations this is a stance that defies both conventional thinking and formal church rules and policies. At the heart of our stance are the examples and teachings of Jesus Christ for radical and unconventional methods of demonstrating God's unconditional grace and love for all people.

On May 7, 2006, a declaration was made by 85% of voting members at St. Mark's to affirm and welcome LGBTI members into all aspects of the life and ministry of the church, establishing what we refer to as a Reconciling Ministry. This affirmation and ministry remain strong nearly eight years later with the full integration in worship, membership, leadership, ministry and general activities at St. Mark's regardless of people's sexual orientation or gender identity. Support of same-sex marriage and promoting access to our worship facilities for LGBTI marriage ceremonies are logical next steps in following the teachings that are outlined in the bible.

Unfortunately the Methodist Book of Discipline still has discriminatory language toward same-sex marriages performed in Methodist churches. St. Mark's affirms that biblical obedience to demonstrate God's love and grace compels us to take a contradictory public stance and to seek amendments to Methodist church policy regarding this issue.

Our message to the Greater Sacramento community is this: if you are members of the LGBTI community, you will not be denied access to a marriage ceremony in a house of worship because of your sexual orientation or sexual identity.

I am **Susan Hunn**, from El Dorado County Federated Church, a Reconciling Congregation.

There are many reasons that the Declaration of Inclusion is important. I would like to touch on three:

First, the community can now associate inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons with the church down the street, not just with certain activist pastors, not in someone else's neighborhood, but in our own. When the people of the local church declare that we embrace marriage for all, it becomes personal. It's not an issue or a policy – it's a daughter, a nephew, the kid next door.

Secondly, the declaration is a signal to the United Methodist bishop that we expect pastors appointed to our churches to embrace inclusion of all persons, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, and that we will support those pastors. It is an indication to pastors that here is a safe place, a church that seeks to follow Jesus' call to love our neighbor fully.

Finally, we declare openly to the United Methodist denomination that the people of our churches will no longer accept language that refuses the full ministry of the church simply because of one's sexual orientation.

This declaration says that we - the soup kitchen volunteer, the youth group counselor, the hospital visitor, the Sunday School teacher, the choir member, the finance committee member, the one who comes every Sunday and the one who comes only Christmas and Easter – WE invite same-sex marriages to be celebrated in our churches, because when Jesus said "Love your neighbor," he meant all of them, all the same.

I will close with a quote from John Wesley, the 18th century founder of Methodism, who wrote:

"... we will obey the rulers and governors of the Church whenever we can, consistently with our duty to God; whenever we cannot, we will quietly obey God rather than men."*

CLOSE—Mark Hedlund:

At Elk Grove United Methodist, we have been a very public and very intentional welcoming congregation ... without exclusion due to sexual orientation ... for at least 25 years. Back in the years when very little was known about what it meant to be transgender, a child of one of our church families had gender reassignment surgery. The church accepted him without question. That's our DNA.

Becoming a fully inclusive congregation has not happened without a lot of discussion, a lot of prayer, and sharing of love in the face of disagreement. But the bottom line is that this is our DNA as Methodists as well. John and Charles Wesley, the co-founders of Methodism, took to the open fields and streets to preach when miners, labors and the poor were not welcome in the Church of England. The precedent had been set; our historic roots had been cast.

We reach out to the homeless and the hungry with our ministry. We reach out to walk on the faith journey with individuals and families from all backgrounds, all orientations ... traditional and non-traditional, no matter.

Our church community ... and all those represented here ... have been blessed and enriched by the many gifts our members and friends bring ... old and young, rich and poor, gay and straight. To not welcome and receive those gifts would be a terrible loss. It's a loss we will not accept.

We're saying we are committed to ignore that part of United Methodist Church law that discriminates. We're saying we're committed to being the spark of change in our denomination worldwide. But most of all, what we're saying is quite simple – when we open our hearts, open our church doors, we will do so without judgment and include all people in our mission and ministry.