

Sacramento Bee Op-Ed, November 21, 2013

Many United Methodists across the nation were saddened to hear the news this week of a clergy Trial Court in Pennsylvania convicting and sentencing Rev. Frank Schaefer for officiating over the marriage of his gay son back in 2007. The sentence of the court was a 30 day suspension and a requirement that Rev. Shafer agree never again to “violate” the rule book of the church, and comply with it “in its entirety” or lose his clergy credentials. This was a tragic outcome to a situation which should never have been brought to a church trial. Charges were brought against Rev. Schafer just weeks before the 6-year statute of limitations would have prevented charges. The charges were brought by the son of a music director who had been dismissed by the congregation. The situation demonstrates the church at its worst, both to those outside the institution as well as those of us agonizing over this display of institutional pathology.

Nationally and internationally the denomination is divided over how to respond faithfully to the presence of LGBTI persons within the church. The United Methodist Church institutionally takes strong stands opposing war, opposing the death penalty, supporting undocumented immigrants, health care reform and other social programs which, to use the words of Jesus, are *good news to the poor*. There are diverse and heated opinions among individual United Methodists concerning these issues and yet none of them results in a Church trial, nor should they. Some of us serve in the military and some of us are pacifists, yet we live in a community of love and mutual respect. This is how we understand the followers of Jesus are called to behave.

Rev. Schaefer upheld the United Methodist Discipline’s insistence that *there should be no semblance of discrimination* within the church. He was a conscientious pastor and loving father to his son. Not to perform his son’s ceremony would have been a betrayal of his covenant both with his church and his son. The denomination was presenting him with a *Catch 22* and chose to punish him when he refused to break either his pastoral or familial covenant. The fact that many of his clergy colleagues refused to recognize his spiritual and pastoral integrity, and then supported this punitive action, is abhorrent to us.

We believe that the church is a church for all people. We celebrate the outstanding qualities exhibited by LGBTI Christians in the Church community. We celebrate many wonderful relationships of commitment and love between same sex couples in our churches. We insist that we cannot divide our congregations into first and second class citizens. As pastors of conscience we believe that our ordination vows require us to offer our services equally. As lay leaders we believe that our vows of baptism and church membership require that we never discriminate. We believe that LGBTI persons are a gift to the church and provide a reminder of the need for honesty and openness concerning the mysteries of identity, sexuality and relationship. In spite of the historic church’s characterization of sexuality as sin, we believe that sexual relating is a precious gift of God over which we are all called to exercise good stewardship. We strongly affirm the Biblical witness and find the use of the Bible to exclude LGBTI persons as an abuse of scripture.

We are honored to be associated with congregations in the Sacramento area where lay leadership have made the commitment not only to extend a warm welcome to LGBTI persons, but also have committed

to ignore our denomination's insistence that our church buildings are not to be used for same-sex marriage or union ceremonies. Our church Councils have all voted to support a Declaration which says: **We 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.**

We are calling on all other United Methodist congregations, both locally and across the nation, to sign onto this declaration. Rev. Martin Luther King reminded us that when we break a law which conscience tells us is unjust we are actually *expressing the highest respect for the law*. We understand that breaking church law involves a personal risk, but we believe that our Church has left us no choice. The God of grace and love insists on a church where all really does mean all.

United Methodist Church (UMC) Council Chairs

Jane Henderson, St. Mark's UMC Sacramento
Theresa Badley, Elk Grove UMC
Barbara Sims, Fair Oaks UMC
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United Methodist Church (UMC) Pastors

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(retired) St. Mark's UMC