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Dear Friends:

After years of intensive and prayerful debate, the General Conference delegates from all over the world voted to remove language that prohibited United Methodist clergy from performing weddings for same-gender couples. **This change allows churches and clergy to operate according to their conscience, without consequence.**

There are some important things about this decision that I want you to know. First, **pastors have always decided who they will marry.** This is based on several factors including the couples' preparation for the marriage covenant. This has not changed. **Pastors will continue to decide who they will marry.** No one will force a pastor to officiate a marriage ceremony for any couple. Second, **churches will continue to determine what weddings are held in their church buildings.** This is the decision of the local church's Board of Trustees. Further, the desires of all clergy and congregations in this matter are to be honored and not judged by others. Specifically, the change will include new language in ¶ 419.12 Book of Discipline that states:

13. The superintendent shall not penalize any clergy for performing, or

refraining from performing, a same-sex marriage service.

14. The superintendent shall neither require any local church to hold or prohibit a local church from holding a same-sex marriage service on property owned by a local church.

**We know that different people have different opinions on these matters and the diversity of perspectives needs to be respected.**

The delegates of the General Conference also voted to remove prohibitions that prevented a Board of Ordained Ministry from recommending a gay or lesbian person for ordination. Gay persons may enter the process to become candidates for ministry, and if approved by the Board of Ordained Ministry, can now be licensed, commissioned, and ordained. **Please be assured that the Bishop and Cabinet will continue to work with churches and clergy to ensure we have the best match possible when making appointments.** We want everyone to have a **VITAL** ministry, not a ministry defined by conflict. We have always worked to place all pastors in appointments where they will be accepted and will be able to work in partnership with the laity to further the mission of Jesus Christ. **Our commitment to the local church and the mission of Christ has not changed.** Your district superintendent will continue to be your primary contact on appointment related issues. These recent decisions at the General Conference, reinforce the primacy of God's love in our lives and the world, and add complexity to our life together as United Methodists.

I realize this General Conference decision may bring about various emotions and reactions within our congregations and the broader denomination. There will no doubt be some who are disheartened and pained by this decision as well as some who welcome it. As we collaborate and work together, I feel sure that we can navigate the complexity and respect one another.

The removal of the language around human sexuality returns us to the Book of Discipline that we have had from the founding of the church in 1784 until 1972 when the General Conference first added the restrictive measures into the

## Book of Discipline.

As United Methodists in West Virginia, **we remain committed to upholding our Wesleyan values of love, grace, and inclusivity.** While we may not all agree on every issue, we are called to continue embodying the love of Christ in our interactions with one another. I invite you to strive to maintain a spirit of unity. Our unity is in Christ and therefore, it is more important than ever to engage in respectful dialogue, compassionate listening, and prayerful practice with one another.

The church is the only institution that exists for those who are not yet a part of it. It exists so others can come to know Christ. It exists to make disciples. Our communion table is open, and so are our hearts. We have important work to do -- together. Without fear, and with the joy of the Lord, let's get to the work Jesus calls us to do. Let us be people who share the transforming power of Christ with the world.

In His Service,

Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball

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