

My dear sisters and brothers in the UMC,

The 2019 Special Session of the General Conference in St. Louis left a remarkable impact to our church. I am completely and utterly disheartened of the result of the General Conference 2019 (GC2019). But let me also share with you some details that had transpired during the GC2019. Feb. 23rd, the first day was a “Day of Prayer.” We almost spent six hours in praying. Bishops of the Central Conference (Africa Central Conferences, Europe Central Conferences and Philippines Central Conference) each presented their missions, ministries and concerns within their conferences. I am of the same mind to lift up all these in prayers. It was just odd that after hours of praying, the body have forgotten to pray for our LGBTQI community. Is it not the purpose of the GC2019 to discuss, debate the issue of human sexuality and church unity? There had been no prayers lifted up concerning LGBTQI community by midday. It has to be raised and voiced out by those who are in support of changing the UMC policies regarding human sexuality. An emotional call to pray for our LGBTQ brothers and sisters happened during the second half of the prayer day.

A delegate from New York Conference Dorothee Benz said, “no substantial time to pray for and with us. And, the presence of LGBTQI persons on the floor as delegates and in the bleachers holding signs and flags were not acknowledged. I wish that the bishops would have acknowledged the harm done to LGBTQI people this morning by their silence. I wish that cisgender heterosexual bishops had come down from the stage to pray with us.”

¹ Bishop Debra Wallace-Padgett of North Alabama ask the body to have a time of prayer for our LGBTQ sibling in the GC2019 and in the world.

The worship team began to sing “I Need You To Survive” and LGBTQ delegates formed a circle at the center of the plenary session and rainbow flags were waved at the Dome at America’s Center. If you want to see a part of what had happened please follow this link, <https://www.facebook.com/RMNetwork/videos/1223537934478801/> and if you need the lyrics of “I Need You To Survive” follow this link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVXKx74J0yk>. The first day of GC2019 ended with Communion.



<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10219063479399439&set=a.3016420731074&type=3&theater>

¹ <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/sweet-hours-of-prayer-begin-gc2019>

Feb. 24th Sunday begun with worship. Bishop Kenneth H. Carter, President of the Council of Bishops called the denomination to maintain its unity for the sake of God's mission. Bishop Carter in his preaching said, "Remember: you are the people of the cross and the flame." He added, "The cross, what God has done for us. And the flame, the fruit of the Holy Spirit, love and joy and peace and patience." If you wish to read the full sermon of Bishop Carter, you may follow this link, http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/council-of-bishops/news_and_statements/documents/GC_Sermon_2019_By_Bishop_Carter.pdf

The GC2019 voted to prioritize petitions for discussion and debate. Ranking from high priority to low priority, the results were read and posted. These were the results. (top 5) according to which will be discussed first: Wespeth Benefits and Investments (518 votes) the Traditional Plan (459), two different plans for how exiting congregations could leave with their property (412 & 406 votes), and the One Church Plan (403). The Simple Plan with its goal to eliminate all restrictive Disciplinary language related to homosexuality, in our Book of Discipline received only 153 high-priority votes. When I saw the results, I must admit I was very disappointed. GC2019 priority was to discuss matters and concerns regarding money. I understand the importance but not as a priority. Nevertheless, I said to myself the GC2019 have two days left to work and perfect these petitions in order and then vote. My heart aches seeing the result of the prioritization process and seeing the Traditional Plan leads. But I was still hopeful for some miracle to happen.

The Rev. Adam Hamilton, senior pastor of United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas with almost 22,000-member spoke for The Simple Plan and said, "Yes, it's going to be defeated, that's clear. But this is the one opportunity to say we care enough to listen for a moment." If this a glimpse of the miracle I was praying and hoping for, let it be. When I heard him say, "it's going to be defeated," I inhaled and exhaled and prayed. But we the LGBTQ1 community present agreed that The Simple Plan must be at least given a chance to be heard.

I will stop detailing the events and discussions that took place after. We all know what happened. The Traditional Plan passed and this will strengthen our denomination's prohibitions against clergy who will officiate same-sex unions and/or those who are "self-avowed practicing homosexuals." Traditional plan also encourages those who will not obey the denomination's prohibitions to find another church. Prepare to have your pastors forced to sign oaths against LGBTQ inclusion. The UMC have been tackling its 47- year stance on homosexuality. It was on April 1972 in Atlanta, Georgia that ended with the addition to The Book of Discipline: "The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching." I cannot imagine my LGBTQ brothers and sisters who were present in the 1972 General Conference must have felt. I cannot imagine the pain and the hurt of our LGBTQ clergy knowing that their sexual orientation after the 1972 General Conference was considered a hindrance into ordination and doing God's work in the world.

In the aftermath of the GC2019, I have experienced the pain, sorrow and hurts inflicted on me by GC2019 decisions. I felt the ache of some members of my two churches from a distance. I was with my LGBTQ siblings after the Traditional Plan passed. We decided to chant outside the plenary hall waiting to be permitted to enter in to the session, to be seen, to be heard but no. We were not allowed to enter and not even permitted to join back the GC2019 to attend the last worship service.

GC2019, “What have you done? In the past twelve General Conferences, you have discriminate your LGBTQ siblings. You have shown injustice. You have promoted exclusivity. You demonstrated hate and not love.” It was painful enough to witness my LGBTQ siblings beg for our basic human dignity during the GC2019. “We have failed to be an obedient church. We have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy.” (UMH #12)

You might be asking now, where do we go from here? The trauma that inflicted the church is overwhelming. Yet, I believed that God is not done with us yet, not done with the UMC. God called us to be faithful witnesses of the Gospel. The Gospel of love, grace and mercy for all. Yes, we have witnessed twelve General Conference of harm and disappointments but God is not done yet. Our church version of Supreme Court, the Judicial Council has already declared that the Traditional Plan is unconstitutional and can't take effect for almost a year. It is unconstitutional, why? We must remember that our constitution protects people from being treated unfairly. The Judicial Council will meet this April and look into the ten of seventeen amendments which are deemed unconstitutional. The future of the UMC is unsure. In the event that the Judicial Council ruled out the Traditional Plan, we need to wait for the 2020 General Conference and it's decision. We need to wait...

For now, I ask you my brothers and sisters in faith to continue to pray for our denomination. We need to pray for our LGTQI siblings who are hurting. For us here at New England Conference, we will meet this June and talk about our future. New England Conference is considered one of the most progressive and liberal conference in the UMC. Yet, we cannot say that we are theologically in one mind and of heart. I encourage you to pause and reflect on this verse,

Psalm 46:10,

‘Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.’

I believe in a God of all creation! I believe in a God that does not take sides. I believe in a God who holds everyone in love. I believe in a God who welcomes all people. I believe in a God who can melt and mold our hearts into one body. For now we need continue to be a church not only to our own faith community but a church to everyone,

regardless of race, ethnicity, language, economic status, physical ability, gender and sexual orientation. For now we need to continue our ministry of justice, ministry of hope and ministry of love to everyone. For now we need to be united in holding each other, in protecting each other and in lifting one another in prayer, especially those who have been hurt and harmed by the decision of the GC2019.

If you need to speak with me, please do not hesitate to call and I will gladly meet with you. Last but not the least, I once again share with you one of my favorite inspiring Bible verse.

Jeremiah 29:11

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord,
"plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

It is my hope that the future of the UMC and our own faith journey will bring glory and honor to our God. Let us keep doing John Wesley's Rule for Christian Living.

"Do All the Good You Can,
By All the Means You Can,
In All the Ways You Can,
In All the Places You Can,
At All the Times You Can,
To All the People You Can,
As long as Ever ...
... You Can!"

I am longing and praying to serve an inclusive Church.
Pastor Nory Vedan Leachon