

A Soulforce Open Letter to Members of the United Methodist Church

On April 30, 2008, delegates to your General Conference meeting in Ft. Worth, Texas, voted to keep these words in their Book of Discipline: *"The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching."* Since 1972 United Methodists have used these words to deny lesbian and gay Methodists the rights of ordination and of marriage. As I write clergy can even use these words to deny lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Christian the rights of membership in a local church.

For 36 years lesbian and gay United Methodists and their allies have worked tirelessly to replace these words with words of affirmation and acceptance. Once again a UMC General Conference has decided to keep those words in place even though they lead to intolerance, discrimination, suffering and even death. In his book *"Why We Can't Wait,"* Martin Luther King, Jr. describes the 1963 struggle for civil rights that climaxed with legislation that ended segregation in the United States. Dr. King's book might have been titled, *"Why We Didn't Wait,"* for he describes the "disappointments" that drove African-Americans into the streets - "disappointments" that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Americans know all too well.

We lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans are also disappointed in the Congress and the courts; disappointed in both political parties and their leadership; disappointed in the lack of change in the United States when European nations are granting their gay and lesbian citizens the full rights of citizenship; but especially we are disappointed in our churches for ignoring the empirical and biblical data that homosexuality is not a sickness to be cured nor a sin to be forgiven.

We, too, are tired of slow change and token changes, tired of defending ourselves against the claims of moral inferiority, tired of being victims of public laws and private humiliations, tired of intolerance and inequality, tired of suffering and dying just because we are different. The historic civil rights legislation of 1964 came just eight years after Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott. It's been almost 40 years since the Stonewall protest in New York City and 36 years since the United Methodists decided that they "...do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching."

With all the changes we can celebrate, the real problem remains the same: the antigay religious teachings and actions that support intolerance and discrimination are still powerfully in place in the United Methodist Church and in most other Protestant and

Catholic Churches. These antigay, religion-based teachings and actions have become the primary source of misinformation against sexual and gender minorities.

Most antigay initiatives and antigay court decisions (local, statewide and national) flow out of those same religious teachings. They give license for gay bashers to harass and harm us and motive for God's gay children to kill ourselves. Instead of changing minds and hearts, the 36 year war of words by leaders of the United Methodist Church has seen those antigay religious teachings harden into place. When will we realize that the antigay teachings cannot be "studied" or "debated" away? It will take another civil rights revolution to end them.

In *"Why We Can't Wait"* Dr. King makes it clear: "The ultimate tragedy of Birmingham was not the brutality of the bad people, but the silence of the good people." It is not the Institute for Religion and Democracy who have kept these tragic words in place. We can't condemn the Confessing Movement for this current dilemma. It is the silence of the good people of the United Methodist Church that is to blame.

But there is a way to end that silence without anger, hatred or violence. Guided by Gandhi's soul force principles, the principles of relentless nonviolent resistance, Dr. King led the people of Birmingham on a journey into justice that "stirred the conscience of the nation." We don't have to wait for a consensus at the next general conference. We can stand for justice now in ways that will empower us and change minds and hearts in the process.

We call on the United Methodist Bishops who know the tragic consequences of those words to refuse to enforce them or to resign in protest. Gandhi said "It is as much our obligation not to cooperate with evil as it is to cooperate with good." Every day a Bishop remains a Bishop he or she gives tacit support to the teachings that are killing us.

We call on the United Methodist clergy who know the tragic consequences of those words to take their stand against them. Welcome us. Marry us. Ordain us. Confront and condemn your fellow clergy who dare to use those words to deny membership to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians. We ask you to take steps immediately to join the Reconciling Ministries Network and to make it known to your community that you are an Open and Affirming Congregation.

We call on members of the United Methodist Church to support your local congregation if it is (or is rapidly becoming) a Reconciling Congregation. But we call upon you to leave your church if your pastor continues to enforce the words that "...do not condone." At least refuse to pay your tithes and offerings until your church opens their doors to all people as Christ commands.

We call on the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender United Methodists, their families and friends, to refuse to finance your own oppression by giving your tithes and offerings to a church that refuses to see you as fully human. How can we continue to support a local congregation where the pastor insists that our relationships are impure or unholy and thus refuses to marry us or insists that we are not really called by God to serve the church and thus refuses to ordain us? How can we even think of staying in a congregation that denies membership to lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender persons? And as you leave, take down that sign or banner that reads *"Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors."* Store it until the United Methodist Church earns the right to use it once again.

Whatever you do to take your stand against those words in the UMC Book of Discipline, do something. We cannot wait for the next General Conference. While those words remain in place lives are being ruined, talents are being wasted, families are being divided and whole generations are being lost to the United Methodist Church. Even worse, how many people have given up their faith in Christ because His church has become a primary source of intolerance and discrimination? Don't wait for a Gandhi or a Martin Luther King, Jr. to lead us out of this wilderness. Whatever you decide to do, your simple act of conscience will make a difference.

One Sunday an African-American pastor was proclaiming those tragic words from the pulpit. "We do not condone..." "...Incompatible with Christian teaching..." "Sick and sinful..." Having heard enough, the gay organist stood up and said loudly, "There will be no more music today." With that he gathered up his music and walked out of the church. After a moment of breathtaking silence, one by one the choir followed. Just seven words and a brief walk down the aisle and a choir was empowered to do justice and a congregation was changed forever.

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