

THE MESSENGER

NEWSLETTER

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IT IS TIME TO DECIDE: Reconciling Church Conference, October 23, 2011

After several years of preparation and discussions, a formal Reconciling Committee came together and was affirmed by the Church Council in 2008. Recently, the committee prepared a Reconciling Proposal, which was presented to and endorsed by the Church Council on May 22nd of this year as announced in the June 15th Messenger. Between 2008 and today, this committee has worked diligently to increase awareness and offer opportunities for study and discussion about the open and welcoming inclusion at Pasadena FUMC of all persons, regardless of sexual orientation, gender, race, ethnicity, age, physical or mental capacity, education and socio-economic or marital status. Now it is time for all of us to vote on the proposal.

Our church is a friendly, welcoming place. At our worship services we greet warmly, introduce ourselves, invite visitors to Coffee Hour and the Friends and Family Lunch, and as a result have received feedback that most visitors feel welcomed.

But our denomination's *Book of Discipline* is not fully inclusive of "all persons," in particular those members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community. It is human nature to stay away where one does not feel wanted, and the gay community believes that about United Methodism.

In order to overcome any sense of exclusion, it is important for us to be very intentional in our expressions of inclusion to the LGBT community, which knows the pain of rejection.

Therefore, the Reconciling Committee is bringing before the membership the proposal that Pasadena FUMC join other United Methodist congregations in our conference and across the country, and become a "Reconciling Congregation." On October 23rd, there will be a Church Conference immediately after the worship service to present the proposal, to be open for questions and discussion, and to take a vote. Our District Superintendent, Rev. Adiel DePano, will preside at the Conference. This is an important decision for the future of our church, and all members are urged to attend, participate, and vote. Please come to worship on October 23rd and stay for the Church Conference.

Voting information: Only those persons whose names appear on the FUMC Pasadena Membership Rolls are eligible to vote. Printed ballots will be provided at the close of the Church Conference. The meeting is scheduled to last no more than one hour, and it is our expectation that every interested member will attend the Church Conference. For those unable to attend who wish to vote, absentee ballots will be available through the Church Office. Voted absentee ballots must be received in the Church Office by 5:00 pm on Friday, October 21st.

Steph Burke, Tricia McRae
Reconciling Committee
Co-chairpersons

The Reconciling Proposal reads as follows:

1. Whereas persons and ministries at Pasadena First United Methodist Church have been in a process over several years of discerning our understanding of God's grace and Christian hospitality to those of all sexual orientations;

Whereas we acknowledge that we stand in respectful disagreement with the United Methodist Church's official policy on homosexuality as well as the ordination of

homosexuals;

Whereas we have embarked upon this journey of discernment through prayer for God's guidance and support; Sunday morning classes with Reverends Lily Villamin, Rich Garner, and Debbie Gara; the establishment of our Reconciling Committee by the Church Council in January of 2008; a sermon series by Reverends Gara, Frank Trotter, and Allison Mark in 2008; a Lenten Bible Study

devoted to the issue of reconciling ministries in 2009; welcoming Bishop Jack Tuell in 2009 to preach and tell his story; the showing of the movie, "For the Bible Tells Me So"; a "Claiming the Promise" Sunday morning Bible study in 2009; and the visitation by members of the Reconciling Committee to all committees and organizations of the church during 2010 and 2011; Whereas United Methodist congregations across

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Letters On Reconciliation

Editor's Note: Printed below are two letters - one directed to the Chair of the Church Council in regard to the Council's recommendation that FUMC become a Reconciling Congregation, and the second is a response to the first from Steph Burke, Co-Chair of the Reconciling Committee.

*From Mrs. Martha G. Horning - Member, FUMC Pasadena
July 26, 2011*

To: J.P. Harris, Church Council Chair, FUMC Pasadena

Dear J.P.-

After careful consideration I have decided to write you regarding the June 15, 2011 Messenger cover article written by you on "Shall We Become A Reconciling Congregation?" I was out of town on May 22 when this was presented to the Church Council, consequently was unable to comment. As a lifelong member of First Methodist, I have been actively involved and I thought well informed. It was a surprise to me that this proposal was under consideration. I have not heard an explanation of this plan from any committee member.

It was my understanding that our church already endorses much of what I have read as included in the Reconciling Congregation proposal. However, it is ambiguous as to how this proposal will be implemented and what impact it will have on the congregation. Since this contradicts the United Methodist Church's official policy on homosexuality and ordination of homosexuals, I question the advisability of adopting such a plan and affiliating with the Reconciling Ministries Network. Are we continuing to be a United Methodist Church or becoming a social action group, much the same as Pasadena All Saints Episcopal Church has been for many years?

First United Methodist Church needs to exercise caution in marketing our facility as a home base for homeless, mentally disturbed and those suffering from substance addiction. In the past this facility experienced costly physical damage from groups allowed to use the church as a meeting place. More recent is the theft of expensive audio equipment and on approximately July 17, 2011 the theft and burning of the chapel American Flag.

During my adult life, I would describe my attitude as a moderate conservative theologically, politically, and socially and not supportive of extreme social action. It should be noted that I have several homosexual friends whose lifestyle does not interfere with our association.

I am in opposition to this proposal of becoming a Reconciling Congregation. This church needs to practice outreach and Christian concern without endorsing a program of social activism and a philosophy that is contrary to Methodism and membership in a "grassroots" organization (RMN), that does not represent all members of the church. First Methodist Church needs to be supportive of our denomination's official policies. We should not follow the small number of Methodist Churches who have chosen this type of social and political action and membership in a national organization that has questionable motives.

Sincerely,
Martha G. Horning

From Mr. Stephen W. Burke - Member, FUMC Pasadena

August 5, 2011

To: Mrs. Martha G. Horning - Member, FUMC Pasadena

Dear Mrs. Horning,

Please allow this letter to introduce me to you and also serve as a response to your letter regarding the Reconciling Committee's proposal to the Church at-large.

My name is Stephen W. Burke, I am married to Ann Burke (nee Wegener, daughter of Tom and Catherine Wegener). I have been a member of Pasadena First United Methodist since 1994. I realize that to some members, that is not a long time. I became a member primarily to spend more time with Tom and Catherine but quickly realized that First United Methodist Church was (and still is) a progressive church actively involved in the pressing social, economic and cultural issues of the day. Over time, I became more involved in church activities and today, along with Tricia McRae, I serve as Co-Chair of the Reconciling Committee and have been a member of the Missions, Peace and Justice Committee for nearly a decade. I, as all other members do, have a stake in First United Methodist and in the church's direction and future.

The Reconciling Committee came together in order to address language contained in the Book of Discipline, which reads, in part:

"All persons need the ministry of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider(s) this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God's grace is available to all. We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us." (*Book of Discipline, paragraph 161, pages 103-104*)

The Reconciling Committee was formed in 2008 and is made up of church members who, since that time, have educated themselves regarding the issues and concerns of the homosexual community. We concluded that the language contained in the Book of Discipline regarding homosexuals, is itself, incompatible with Christian teaching. In fact, that language did not exist in the Book of Discipline until 1972. The Committee further concluded that the language was exclusionary and not in keeping with the sincerely welcoming attitude of Pasadena First United Methodist Church and our credo, "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors."

The Reconciling Committee and various pastors have provided many opportunities for our members to become better informed about Scripture as it pertains to the gay community, by presenting sermons, creating a Lenten series, Bible studies and more. This year, after much thought and prayerful deliberation, the Reconciling Committee submitted the following proposal to the Church Council:

"We at Pasadena First United Methodist Church are a Christian community seeking intentionally to welcome all persons, regardless of sexual orientation, gender, race, ethnicity, age, physical or mental capacity, education, and socio-economic status.

“We practice God’s ministry of reconciliation through worship, devotion, compassion, and justice for all who have known the pain of exclusion and discrimination.

“Our greatest challenge and only hope is to receive and share God’s all-encompassing love.”

The Church Council endorsed the proposal almost unanimously with one amendment which calls for specific statements from the Book of Discipline concerning this proposal be made available to the congregation before a Church Conference in the fall, which will be called by the District Superintendent or his representative.

A bit of history, if I may. The Stonewall Riot, as it has become known, occurred in New York City during the summer of 1969. It is the acknowledged “coming out” of the gay community in that the gay community and the community at large, fought back against repressive police tactics during a raid on a gay bar. The gay community in New York held a parade on the anniversary of the incident and a parade has been held in cities across America every year on that date to celebrate gay pride.

Many people found the public displays by the gay community to be offensive, distasteful, and threatening. This, I believe, is the genesis for the language adopted by the General Conference for inclusion in the Book of Discipline. I may be wrong. The fact remains that such language did not exist previous to 1972, and the language was inserted at the first General Conference held after the Stonewall Riot and the “coming out” of the gay community. Does that mean the Church had no position on homosexuality previous to 1972? Or perhaps there was no issue previous to 1972 because the homosexual community was hidden away from most of America and most church members?

Whatever the case, at that time, clergy and laity advocated for the church to take a stance on homosexuality by advocating for change in the Church’s position. Since then, forty years on, there has been a growing movement among clergy and laity to return the church to its previous position by having that particular language deleted from the Book of Discipline.

As stated previously, the Reconciling Committee believes the current language to be exclusionary, and not in keeping with the teachings or examples of Jesus Christ.

We wish to make our church and the wider church, aware of our belief that the current language is exclusionary and again, not in keeping with Christian thought, Christian teaching or Christian values. However, adoption of this proposal would not change any language in the Book of Discipline, rather it would make clear to all, church member or not, that First United Methodist Church, Pasadena, intentionally welcomes all people to come, to worship, to serve.

That is the sole purpose of the proposal presented to the Church Council and recommended for adoption by the general congregation.

I regret your’re not hearing an “explanation of this plan from any committee member.” The Committee strived to contact and meet with every single church group, committee and fellowship group within the church in order to let members know and comment on the Committee’s objective and proposed language.

We conducted these meetings primarily during 2010, with a few hold-overs done this year. You mention that you were not aware of this process, (a process begun over five years ago), so I am concerned that others may be unaware too. It is only at this late date that the Committee has received comments of concern regarding the proposed language and the process. I assure you, the Reconciling Committee has not conducted a stealth campaign in order to sneak this proposal by unaware church members. Instead, the members of the Reconciling Committee have been open and above board with our advocacy for change. I have included for your information the Reconciling Committee’s pamphlet entitled “Reconciliation: Living Our Core Value: Inviting Community.” I trust the information provided will alleviate some of your concerns.

I have heard comments that the Reconciling Committee is composed of just a few people and not representative of the thoughts and concerns of First United Methodist church or the church overall. Jesus and the disciples must have heard similar comments from the political, social, religious and cultural leaders of his day. One has to remember that the church split over the issue of slavery (1844), that there was intense division over the ordination of women (1956, an issue that seems so distant and remote from current day), misgivings with church advocacy for civil rights for black people, divisiveness over miscegenation and the Vietnam War. All of these issues involved changing ideas, changing values and changing moral precepts. All of these issues took much prayerful discernment and thought. All, for the most part, have been resolved. Importantly, all these issues required advocates for change, advocates for moving the church in a future direction by keeping Christian teaching current with the times.

Change can be hard. Change for the church may be particularly difficult. I am aware that, should the congregation accept the Reconciling Committee’s proposal, some members may depart. That was the case with all of the other issues mentioned above, yet this church has continued on, and, I believe, has grown in large part because its members, old and new, believe in change for the future, believe in the word of Jesus Christ (who said nothing about homosexuality), believe in the Bible as a vibrant, living document, believe in advocacy for those who have suffered the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (whether they be poor, black, gay, straight, or female), believe in redress of grievances, believe in compassion, and mercy, and equality and justice and inclusion - formal inclusion, not just lip service to these articulated values. Our church’s common values and moral precepts will be tried in deciding this issue, however, a virtue or moral value untested is no virtue or value at all.

Without having properly met you, but knowing you are a member of First Church, I trust you believe these things too. Please, let’s continue to communicate with each other.

Sincerely,
Stephen W. Burke

Reconciling proposal, continued from page 1

the connection are deciding to join the Reconciling Ministries Network by officially declaring themselves as “reconciling congregations”;

Whereas such action to do so is not contrary to The Book of Discipline;

and Whereas we are also strongly committed to other social justice ministries at FUMC including: reaching out to the homeless, dismantling racism, concern for all of God’s creation, AIDS Posada Walk and AIDS Service Center, Friends in Deed, Habitat for Humanity, Heifer Project, Imagine No Malaria, Mexico Mission Trip (Youth Ministry), Mission partner support, Red Cross Blood Drive, Social Services, Union Station, United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), and Volunteers in Mission (VIM);

Therefore, the Reconciling Committee moves that the Church Council of Pasadena FUMC endorses the following “Reconciling Statement” on this day – Sunday, May 22, 2011:

“We at Pasadena First United Methodist Church are a Christian community seeking intentionally to

welcome all persons, regardless of sexual orientation, gender, race, ethnicity, age, physical or mental capacity, education, and socio-economic or marital status.

“We practice God’s ministry of reconciliation through worship, devotion, compassion, and justice for all who have known the pain of exclusion and discrimination.

“Our greatest challenge and only hope is to receive and share God’s all-encompassing love.”

2. Further, upon endorsement by the Church Council, the Reconciling Committee moves that the pastors and the Council request permission of the Rev. Adiel DePano, our district superintendent, to call a Church Conference in October of 2011 for the purpose of asking the members of the congregation to likewise endorse the Council’s decision. Upon the establishment of a date, the Reconciling Committee will do its utmost to encourage all members to be in attendance for this significant time of congregational discernment. The proposal as presented at the Church Conference meeting

will include the Book of Discipline statements related to this proposal and identify where they are in conflict or agreement.

3. Finally, in the event that the voting members of the Pasadena FUMC congregation choose to become a functioning reconciling congregation, the Church Council would further move that Pasadena FUMC overtly and concretely: (a) work within our own congregation to further our understanding and practice of grace and hospitality; (b) connect and work with other United Methodists who share our perspective; and (c) that Pasadena FUMC become a member of the Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN).

Respectfully submitted by
The Reconciling Committee
Steph Burke and Tricia McRae,
Co-Chairpersons
Dr. Frank Trotter, Rev. Debbie Gara,
and Rev. Allison Mark, Pastors

Sunday, May 22, 2011

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