



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

VIRGINIA CONFERENCE

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Addressing Disinformation in The United Methodist Church

To the members and friends of the Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church:

As we approach the convening of the postponed 2020 General Conference in Charlotte, N.C., I must address the varying types of disinformation being promulgated by some as they continue intentionally and concertedly to undermine and tear apart The United Methodist Church. The following are commitments I want to make as your resident Bishop:

1. The Cabinet and I spend countless hours praying and discerning appointments in order to get the best pastoral fit between pastors and congregations. We are not part of a subversive or underground campaign to appoint LGBTQ+ pastors to every congregation. We would never send clergy to parishes that would not welcome them, follow their leadership, and do them harm. Further, many congregations have indicated that they would be delighted to receive LGBTQ+ pastors. We do not anticipate an overwhelming supply of LGBTQ+ pastors and there should be more than enough congregations to receive those LGBTQ+ pastors we anticipate having.
2. One common point of disinformation is the assertion that, over time, all United Methodist clergy will be forced to perform gay weddings or face being sued if they refuse to officiate. This allegation shows an ignorance of our legal system and denies the great deference it gives to clergy. The U.S. doctrine of separation of church and state prohibits the intrusion of the state into church affairs. Such a lawsuit will never succeed. Giving clergy the opportunity to discern their involvement in a wedding is a right that has always been given to clergy. Calendar conflicts, family conflicts, and differences of perspective have long been realities that keep clergy from officiating weddings. You will always have the ability to refer a couple to another United Methodist clergyperson who might be able to officiate a wedding for a couple when you cannot, no matter what the circumstance might be. No doubt countless clergy refused to conduct marriages between persons of different races when that was legalized. Have you ever heard of a biracial couple bringing suit and successfully forcing a clergyperson to conduct their wedding? No. It hasn't ever, and will never, happen.
3. Much fear is stirred up by saying that the "progressive movement" and "woke agenda" are taking over The United Methodist Church. Often such statements are coupled with derogatory comments about "social justice." Social justice and social action do not require alignment with a single political party or perspective. To be clear, The United Methodist Church has a proud history of standing on the side of the poor, the imprisoned, the migrant, the oppressed, and the excluded.

The Methodist movement born in England in the 1700's spoke out against these evils from its inception. The early Methodists established orphanages, feeding stations, schools, and medical facilities. They worked to abolish debtor prisons and the slave trade in the British Empire. Indeed, for John Wesley the natural and expected outgrowth of being personally transformed by Christ ("personal piety") was to respond to the call to transform society and the world ("social Holiness"). The two cannot be separated: Methodism is not Methodism without social action.

4. United Methodists also have long been at the forefront of the civil rights movement and all other movements that work to ensure that all of God's children have the equal opportunity to fully live into their God-given gifts and calling. We are proudly inclusive because God excludes none of God's children and, as revealed in Scripture, God has harsh words for any political system that treats any of God's children inequitably. We also live as ambassadors for a God that is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and always seeking what is best for God's children. We are to channel God's compassion and mercy for all who are in unimaginably hard circumstances, especially those without safety and prosperity in the countries of their birth. We take exception to any who do not first approach aliens, strangers, and migrants with compassion and mercy. It is incomprehensible to us to perceive them with fear, contempt, superiority, and ugliness. We certainly cannot categorically label them all as rapists, murderers, thieves, and vermin. Such an approach does not reflect the nature of the God we follow and is contrary to our Methodist heritage and the gospel of Jesus Christ.
5. We want it to be clear that there will be a place for all in The United Methodist Church. We appreciate traditionalists, centrists, and progressives and stand ready to evangelize as many people as possible by having traditionalist, centrist, and progressive churches. In fact, we doubt there are very few churches that can be described with one of these labels. Most churches are a wonderful array of folks of all types. We see the church as a place of compassion and grace in which all of us journey together as we seek to become more perfect in love for God and love for neighbor. We are bound together in our common proclivity to sin and to pursue our own agendas. Only in an environment of grace and love, with mutual support, where the Holy Spirit does its amazing transforming work, can we work as one in mission to the world. We are bound together by our common mission and our common dependence on God. We do not let our own disagreements drive us apart, but we stay together for the sake of the mission and to live into Jesus' prayer that we all may be one. Being one despite our differences is our best witness to the supernatural power of God that unites and transforms us all.

Beyond the commitments we make and the responses we have in the Virginia Annual Conference, I would invite you to review the [linked statement from the Council of Bishops](#), which underscores the need for unity in The United Methodist Church.

In closing, I want to condemn the disinformation that is being disseminated that is overtly racist and homophobic. It is unfair to take isolated and extreme situations and present them as the norm or that which will be widespread in the future. We invite all United Methodists to consider the source of such polarizing materials, and to be in conversation with folks throughout the connection, as well as Conference leadership, to gain perspective and a more balanced analysis of our current situation. Our doors are always open to hear your concerns and fairly discuss all matters.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Sue Hauptert-Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'S' and 'J'.

Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson
Resident Bishop, Virginia Annual Conference