

‘This is not who we are as Methodist Christians’: Houston pastor calls for full LGBT inclusion [Opinion]

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Many American Methodists disagree with the United Methodist Church’s recent vote not to perform LGBT marriages or ordain LGBT clergy.

The United Methodist Church’s governing body recently abandoned its faithful LGBTQAI+ members, disregarding scripture, its theology and the teachings of Jesus by refusing to grant them full inclusion in the life of the church.

Under the denomination’s current rules, Methodist clergy are not allowed to perform same-gender weddings or celebrate them in church buildings. Gifted and anointed LGBTQAI+ persons are also denied ordination.

This past February, the UMC General Conference had a chance to change that, but refused, continuing to support and enforce discrimination of LGBTQAI+ persons. In making its decision, the denomination lost focus on the core of Christian teaching and Methodist theology that *all* of us are beloved creations of God and vital to the family of God in our diversity: inclusive of

gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, color, age, class, ability, nationality, status and beyond.

To our LGBTQAI+ family, friends and community members, as an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church, the senior pastor of Bering Memorial UMC, chair of the Reconciling United Methodists Texas Conference and a scholar of scripture and Methodist theology, I ask your forgiveness for the tremendous harm that the United Methodist Church has done over the years and continues to do by its recent actions.

While I cannot speak for the United Methodist denomination and do not speak for those who support the traditional plan passed by the denomination, I believe that I speak for hundreds of thousands of United Methodist clergy and laity when I say that this is not who we are as Methodist Christians.

As Methodist Christians, we believe that the Bible is to be carefully studied and interpreted using four criteria: scripture, tradition, reason and experience. We are not literalists.

A faithful interpretation of the Bible using those four criteria supports biblical marriage as rooted in fidelity in relationship, not in the gender of marriage partners. Biblical marriage is not limited to marriage between a man and a woman. Same-gender marriages are celebrated by God and should be celebrated by God's church. That includes every marriage that is rooted and grounded in love and fidelity, whether between persons of the same or different genders.

Contrary to decisions made by the General Conference, it is my conviction and the conviction of many other Methodist Christians that the Bible *does not* teach that LGBTQAI+ identity and living out that identity are "incompatible with Christian teaching." The Bible *does not* say that as LGBTQAI+ persons, you need to "pray away the gay" or otherwise "fix" or deny your gender identity or sexual orientation.

The Bible *does* teach that all of us are made in the image of God, inclusive of our sexual orientation and gender identity. According to the Bible, there is nothing incompatible or deviant about being LGBTQAI+ and living out that identity faithfully and fully in loving relationships of marriage, family and friendships, and as members of the larger community.

The Bible teaches, and the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaims, that such faithful claiming of one's gender identity and sexual orientation is to be celebrated as a sacred gift to both heterosexual and LGBTQAI+ persons. It takes each of us faithfully and fully living out our unique identity individually and together to mirror the rainbow face of God in all God's love, creativity and divinity.

I have seen the face of God and experienced the presence of God in the LGBTQAI+ members of our community and know without a doubt that they are loved and celebrated by God as fully as I am.

God's message to *all* of us is that God so loved the world that God came and lived among us in the person of Jesus Christ that we might have abundant life. Jesus spent his entire earthly

ministry sharing the love of God for all humanity by including the excluded, tearing down walls of separation and division and restoring the dignity of those who had been judged unworthy by religious rules of exclusion.

Jesus touched, embraced, healed, dignified and welcomed those explicitly excluded by such rules. He made it crystal clear that the core of God's word to us could be summed up in two commandments: love God and love our neighbors.

LGBTQAI+ family, friends and neighbors, you are unabashedly loved and celebrated by God, me and hundreds of thousands of United Methodists who refuse to honor the recent discriminatory decisions of the General Conference of the United Methodist Church. We need you, welcome you and celebrate you as beloved children of God and members of God's family with us.

McGehee is pastor of Bering United Methodist Church.
