

Marriage at First United Methodist Church of Austin

Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the United States Supreme Court ruling that recognized the constitutional right of same-sex couples to marry, that "no union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than they once were."

We find echoes of Justice Kennedy's words in *The Book of Discipline* of The United Methodist Church, which states that "we affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity" and "believe that God's blessing rests upon such marriage."

The United Methodist Church also holds that "a service of Christian marriage is a celebration of love, but not simply the romantic love of the couple. It also celebrates the love of God for us, and the love Jesus calls us Christians to share with the world" and finds that the marriage ceremony is not for the couple alone but for the community, made up of "more than passive observers," who promise to support the couple throughout their life together.¹

The United Methodist Church has long stated that local United Methodist churches set their own wedding policies and that the "decision to perform the ceremony is the right and responsibility of the pastor, in accordance with the laws of the state and The United Methodist Church."²

Yet The United Methodist Church also posits that marriage is only between a man and a woman, prohibits the solemnization of marriages between two persons of the same sex, and prevents its ministers from exercising their discretion to determine whether to marry a couple only in those instances in which the couple are not in a heterosexual relationship. The General Conference of The United Methodist Church has chosen to negate the wisdom and discernment of the couple's pastor to determine who is ready for marriage; to preclude the couple's church community the opportunity to affirm the marriage through the use of its facilities and the services of its clergy; and to deny the couple the full participation of their pastor, church community, and physical church home in the sacred commitment they make to each other. At a Called General Conference held in St. Louis from February 23–26, 2019, delegates adopted "The Traditional Plan," which among other provisions prescribed a harsh penalty for a pastor who is found guilty of violating *The Book of Discipline* by officiating a marriage ceremony for a same-sex couple: A mandatory one-year suspension without pay for a minister for the first violation of this prohibition and an automatic loss of credentials upon being found guilty of a second violation.

History of FUMC-Austin and Marriage

The members of First United Methodist Church of Austin (FUMC) spent most of 2017 engaged in a period of discernment regarding marriage. Led by a Discernment Committee appointed by the

¹ "I do: How United Methodists understand Christian marriage": <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/i-do-how-united-methodists-understand-christian-marriage>

² United Methodist Book of Worship, 1992; <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/can-i-get-married-in-any-united-methodist-church-that-i-choose>

Administrative Board, the congregation undertook a period of study and spiritual discernment beginning in January 2017 to seek the will of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in determining how to respond to the failure of the General Conference of The United Methodist Church to revise *The Discipline* so that FUMC (and other United Methodist congregations) can be fully and equally in ministry to all persons.

The intensive discernment process found that a significant majority of FUMC members were committed to supporting and honoring all legal marriages, including same-sex marriages, equally. That included a fervent desire to make FUMC's sanctuary and other property available for ceremonies of all legal marriages, including same-sex marriages. Our clergy did not want to violate their vows to uphold *The Book of Discipline* by performing same-sex weddings, or to face possible sanctions, up to and including the loss of ministerial credentials, if they were to allow same-sex weddings at our facilities. Hopeful that the special General Conference of The United Methodist Church scheduled for February 2019 would enact legislation to allow congregations and pastors to follow their conscience in regards to marriage ceremonies for all couples, the members of FUMC shared the desire that their pastors not assume undue risk prior to the called General Conference.

Finding that it could not in good faith support a resolution to allow same-sex weddings in our facilities at that time, the congregation by an affirmative vote of 93 percent adopted a policy in September 2017 to treat weddings of opposite-sex and same-sex couples equally, providing that:

- No marriages would be performed on FUMC property after December 31, 2017, or officiated by FUMC clergy;
- The congregation's assigned pastors may offer premarital counseling to all couples who may legally be married;
- FUMC clergy may assist any couple that wishes to be married in a church sanctuary to identify a church and congregation that welcomes all couples regardless of sexual orientation. They may also coordinate with clergy of other denominations who are permitted to conduct weddings for all couples in order to facilitate a church wedding; and
- FUMC pastors may participate in any same-sex or opposite-sex marriage ceremony by offering a blessing, prayer, or homily, but may not officiate at a marriage ceremony by presiding over the exchange of vows or rings, by delivering the declaration and pronouncement of the marriage, or by signing the marriage license.

The resolution adopted by the congregation on September 24, 2017, also provided that the policy would be reviewed by the Administrative Board not later than two months after the special General Conference of The United Methodist Church called for February 2019.

In the aftermath of that Called General Conference, FUMC leaders appointed a Task Force on Moving Forward to recommend appropriate responses to the outcome of the Conference. We remember that in the vows we renew for ourselves and our community every time we welcome a new member of our church family, we promise to “resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.” We believe and affirm that the discriminatory provisions of *The Book of Discipline* are incompatible with the inclusive teachings of Jesus Christ, as well as our

United Methodist Constitution, and are fundamentally contrary to our mission and to our service to each member of the church.

Our collective conscience demands that we stop participating in discrimination and that we fully live out our commitment to those with whom we are in community. Knowing that there are risks to this course of action, we repeat with Martin Luther, “To go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I can do nothing else.”

Thus, the marriage subcommittee of the Task Force quickly found consensus on the following points, which it and the full Task Force recommend to the Administrative Board and members of First United Methodist Church of Austin:

- That First United Methodist Church of Austin affirm its commitment to treat all couples, whether opposite-sex or same-sex, seeking the blessing of marriage equally;
- That the sanctuary and facilities of First United Methodist Church of Austin thus be available to all couples on an equal basis for weddings, regardless of the sexual orientation of the couple;
- That clergy assigned to serve First United Methodist Church of Austin retain their traditional authority to determine the fitness of any couple to enter into marriage and to discern whether to officiate any marriage; and
- That the members of First United Methodist Church of Austin affirm their intent to support any of our pastors who are suspended for responding to a call to officiate a marriage ceremony for a same-sex couple, including continuing to provide their then-current salaries and related benefits for the period of any suspension and to pay costs attendant to any church trial for a charge of violating *The Book of Discipline* by performing that marriage ceremony.