

Recommendation of the Marriage Committee to the Church Council on Conducting Same-Sex Marriages at Oak Lawn United Methodist Church

“In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love.” — St. Augustine

“There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” — Galatians 3:28

“You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” — Luke 10:27

The Marriage Committee’s search for understanding of the question about allowing the conduct and celebration of same-sex marriages at Oak Lawn United Methodist Church begins with the three quotations above. The first, attributed to St. Augustine, the German Lutheran theologian, Rupertus Meldenius, and John Wesley, among others, instructs us to distinguish for ourselves that which is necessary for Salvation from those things which are not, and it reminds us of the overarching injunction to love.

Paul’s words tell us that human-made distinctions among us are subservient to the foundational and essential teaching that we are all God’s children, and that we are all one in the eyes and heart of Jesus. Likewise, the Great Commandment, Jesus’s own words, forces us to view our love of our brothers and sisters in the same light as we view our love of God. In other words, it is essential to know and understand that we are indeed one, along with our neighbors, in Jesus Christ. For God recognizes our essential worth as God’s beloved children, and God does not hold the artificial divisions made by humans as real.

We also used what is referred to as the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” to inform our discussion and our decision. We looked to the four components of the Quadrilateral — Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience — to guide our beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and behavior.

We believe Scripture is clear. Paul said it very well, but there is other Scripture that applies. The stories of Jesus and his love for the downtrodden, the underdog, and the marginalized come first to mind, including children, women, and the hated foreigners. He fed them and healed them, and he encouraged his followers, and us today, to continue his work by caring for the sick, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned, finding homes for the homeless, and bringing comfort to all. The message of love is overarching, and Christ’s love was for all.

Traditions change. Separation of sexes and segregation of races immediately come to mind. But American traditions also change. We once had segregated schools. We once had separate schools, or no schooling at all, for the disabled. Gay and lesbian citizens were once excluded from military service. One major tradition, now changing from events in the recent past, is the tradition that marriage was only between a man and a woman. It took the Supreme Court to make it law, but that tradition was changing long before the court’s ruling.

Our reason changes as we learn more. What have we learned about the origins of sexual orientation and gender identity over the past decade that has changed our minds? We know now that these are not conscious decisions people make, but are an integral part of one’s personhood. Sexual orientation and gender identity are not choices in a cafeteria, but manifestations of the self — the God-given self.

Our experiences cause us to change and grow. What experiences have you had that have cause you to change your beliefs and attitudes about our LGBTQ+ neighbors? How have those experiences affected your opinions and behaviors? Our experiences changed us. How have your experiences changed you?

As we looked through the four lenses of the Quadrilateral, we found our beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and behaviors changed in response to our study of Scripture, changing traditions, our reason, and our experience.

Recommendation of the Marriage Committee to the Church Council on Conducting Same-Sex Marriages at Oak Lawn United Methodist Church

Background

At the OLUMC Church Council meeting held August 27, 2017, there was a request brought forward by the Trustees to hold a wedding of two of our members on church premises. Because this was a same-sex marriage, and paragraph 341.6 of the United Methodist Book of Discipline states that “Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches,” it was decided that the wedding could take place on the front steps of the church. While it is arguable that having the wedding outside the sanctuary was still forbidden by the Discipline, a state district judge, not United Methodist clergy, would conduct the ceremony. It was using this reasoning that the request for the marriage ceremony was approved.

However, this decision surfaced the larger issue of the position of Oak Lawn United Methodist Church on same-sex marriages. In the discussion that followed in the Church Council meeting, it was decided that we should explore this issue for the local church, study the pros and cons of conducting such services at Oak Lawn United Methodist Church, and make a recommendation from the Church Council to a full Church Conference on the feasibility of conducting same-sex marriages in our church. The Lay Leader, Jim Parsons, was appointed by the Church Council to lead this effort.

After many weeks of study and research, prayerful consideration, and discussion with others, the Lay Leader brought forward to the Church Council and the November 11th Church Conference the following recommendation.

First, the Church Council should create an ad hoc “Marriage Committee” with the charge to develop a recommendation to the Church Council on the matter of conducting same-sex marriages at Oak Lawn United Methodist Church. The Committee would meet no more than eight times over a three-month period to research, study, and prayerfully consider the issues and consequences entailed in allowing same-sex marriages at the church.

Second, the Marriage Committee should consist of no more than seven members, including the Lay Leader as Chair. These members would be selected based on their interest in the matter, their commitment to marriage, their ability to consider all aspects of the issues, and their willingness to make a critical decision that would affect the life of the church.

Finally, the Marriage Committee would develop a recommendation to the Church Council on this issue, with the implication that the recommendation would be passed on to a Church Conference for final action and implementation.

The Church Conference voted unanimously in favor to create the Marriage Committee.

The Charge of the Marriage Committee

The Marriage Committee was given this charge at its commissioning: To explore the issue of same-sex marriage at OLUMC and to make a recommendation to the Church Council. At our first meeting, we expanded and clarified our charge, as follows: *The question before the Marriage Committee is simple. Based on the UMC's broader principles of inclusion and full ministry to all members, should the Oak Lawn United Methodist Church permit the conduct and celebration of all marriages in our church, notwithstanding the Discipline of the United Methodist Church?* Our question is limited to considering only the use of Church facilities. We do not direct or

Recommendation of the Marriage Committee to the Church Council on Conducting Same-Sex Marriages at Oak Lawn United Methodist Church

encourage any OLUMC clergy to conduct same-sex marriages. We view that as a matter between the individual, the United Methodist Church, and God. However, we shall support our clergy, regardless of his/her decision.

The Members of the Marriage Committee

Louis Dorfman

Keith Head

John Horany

Gretchen Toler-Debus

Judy White

Chair, Jim Parsons

The only voting members are all members of the Laity of the Oak Lawn United Methodist Church. The Committee also had two *ex-officio* members, the Reverend Justin Hancock and Joan Wu (Certified Candidate for Local Pastor). Because of their relationship with the North Texas Conference as clergy, they were not allowed to vote, but they did share their learning about theology and church polity with the Committee. The Committee also invited the OLUMC Senior Pastor, the Reverend Rachel Baughman, and the Metro District Superintendent, the Reverend Cammy Gaston, to participate in discussions and offer their expertise and experience, but they, too, could not vote on the final recommendation. The Committee is grateful for the contributions offered by all who participated; however, it is important to note that the recommendations of the Marriage Committee represent only the views of the lay members.

The Process of the Marriage Committee

The process of the Committee combined expert presentations, personal research, sustained discussion, surveys and interviews with congregants, a meeting with the Bishop, and ultimately, the final recommendations. The following Timeline outlines the topics and schedule of our discussion.

Timeline

August 27, 2017	Church Council Approves Same-sex Marriage to be conducted at OLUMC Church Council Commissions Marriage Committee
November 12, 2017	Church Conference Adopts Proposal
Week of November 13, 2017	Identification of Marriage Committee members
Tuesday, November 28, 2017	Organizational Meeting
Tuesday, December 5, 2017	Background and History of Marriage in the UMC Dr. Ted Campbell, Professor, Perkins School of Theology
Tuesday, December 12, 2017	Possible Consequences for OLUMC
Tuesday, December 19, 2017	Discussion of Pros and Cons

Recommendation of the Marriage Committee to the Church Council on Conducting Same-Sex Marriages at Oak Lawn United Methodist Church

Thursday, January 18, 2018	Meeting with Bishop McKee, and District Superintendent Cammy Gaston
Sunday, January 21, 2018	Listening Sessions (Sunday, 1/21; Sunday 1/28; Tuesday 1/30)
Tuesday, January 30, 2018	Meeting on Possible Proposal to take Forward
Week of February 5, 2018	Draft Proposal to Committee
Week of February 12, 2018	Final Proposal for Church Council
February 18, 2018	Church Council receives Committee's recommendation
March 2018	Church Conference and Congregational Vote

Note: Each meeting was scheduled for two hours.

It is impossible to summarize the more than twelve hours of conversation among eight to ten people during, after, and between our six meetings and three listening sessions. However, to give a flavor of the issues we discussed, here is a list of Guiding Questions we used to shape our December 19th meeting. These questions also surfaced in all later meetings.

I. Who?

- a. Who will benefit from a decision to allow same-sex marriages to be conducted at OLUMC?
- b. Who will be harmed, or offended, by this decision?

II. What?

- a. What does this decision mean to you personally?
- b. What are the possible consequences of making the decision to allow same-sex marriages at OLUMC?
- c. What are the possible consequences of sticking with the status quo?

III. When?

- a. When should we tell our full congregation about our work?
- b. When should we make our decision?
- c. When should the decision be effective?

IV. How?

- a. How shall we tell our full congregation about our work? Our decision?
- b. How shall we inform the community outside our congregation?

V. Why?

- a. Why are we even considering allowing same-sex marriages at OLUMC?
- b. Why are we willing to take the risks associated with this action?

Recommendation of the Marriage Committee to the Church Council on Conducting Same-Sex Marriages at Oak Lawn United Methodist Church

- c. Why now? Why not wait until 2019 when the United Methodist Church comes to a decision?

In addition to our presentations, interviews, and discussion, we were also guided by a 200+ page notebook, compiled by our Committee Chair, that provided information from numerous sources. Those sources included the Bible, the Book of Discipline, other United Methodist publications, writings from others in the nation struggling with a solution for this issue, including three churches – two in the Dallas area – which had gone through similar processes to ours. A copy of our notebook will be available in the Church Library and/or Archives for public perusal.

A continuing theme of our discussions was the question of possible consequences to our Church, our congregation, and our clergy of a decision to allow same-sex marriages at OLUMC. We addressed this issue directly at our December 12th meeting, and the issue arose at every meeting, including our session with Bishop McKee on January 18th.

The following outlines our research and conclusions on the topic of risk and consequences. We are heavily indebted to the Marriage Committee at Northaven United Methodist Church, which drafted a very similar document two years ago.

What are the possible consequences if we approve a proposal to permit the celebration of all marriages in our church?

- Anyone in the North Texas Conference could file a charge against Rachel Baughman, as our senior pastor (or against any OLUMC clergy).

A charge against Rachel is possible based upon Oak Lawn's approval of a proposal, actually having celebrations of same-sex marriages at Oak Lawn, and/or Rachel or other OLUMC clergy conducting a same-sex marriage ceremony. The charge could be lodged at any time, subject to a six-year statute of limitations.

The existence of a chargeable offense does not require that Rachel or any other OLUMC clergy actually conduct a same-sex marriage ceremony (which is specifically prohibited under Paragraph 2702.1(b) of the Book of Discipline).

Paragraph 2702.1(b) also more generally addresses "practices declared by The United Methodist Church to be incompatible with Christian teaching," and the Book of Discipline includes homosexuality in that category (Paragraph 161(F)).

Although a charge against our senior pastor could be resolved with a just resolution by the Bishop, that is not guaranteed. It could require a church trial.

It is, however, not clear that simply approving a marriage proposal would be seen as a chargeable offense. Even if that is not likely, conducting or celebrating a same-sex marriage in our church, with or without the participation of our clergy, could be a chargeable offense. Each celebration could be a separate chargeable offense.

Other churches have permitted the celebration of same-sex marriages on church property without charges being filed against clergy, to our knowledge. A visible example is Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, DC, but there are a number of others.

Recommendation of the Marriage Committee to the Church Council on Conducting Same-Sex Marriages at Oak Lawn United Methodist Church

- Similarly, anyone in the North Texas Conference could file a charge against a member of Oak Lawn, including the members of the Marriage Committee or members in leadership positions.

Charges against lay members are possible under Paragraph 2702.2 of the Book of Discipline, specifically under clauses (c) (“disobedience to the order and discipline of The United Methodist Church”) and/or (d) (“dissemination of doctrines contrary to the established standards of doctrine of The United Methodist Church”).

While we believe there are no precedents for such a charge in the context of same-sex marriage, it is possible on any of the bases described above with respect to charges against clergy.

Pursuant to Paragraph 2703.3 of the Book of Discipline, if there is such a charge, the pastor or the District Superintendent is to take pastoral steps to resolve any complaints. If not resolved, the senior pastor, in consultation with the District Superintendent and the District Lay Leader, may appoint a committee, which would include both lay and clergy members from churches other than those of the targeted member or the complainant.

As with a charge against clergy, a charge against a member may be resolved by just resolution. If not resolved by just resolution or otherwise, it could be referred to a church trial. We understand that that there are no modern precedents for a church trial against a lay member.

Other churches have permitted the celebration of same-sex marriages on church property without charges being filed against lay members to our knowledge. Examples include Northaven, Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, DC and Trinity United Methodist Church in Austin.

- A new senior pastor could be appointed for OLUMC.
The Bishop of the North Texas Conference has the power to appoint our Senior Pastor. The Bishop is not required to consult with our congregation.

A change in appointment could, theoretically, happen at any time, but it may be separated in time by a substantial period from the church’s approval of a marriage proposal or the celebration of a same-sex marriage in our church, with or without the involvement of our clergy. It may not be directly or expressly connected to the marriage issue.

- A new senior pastor may resist the congregation’s effort to implement a same-sex marriage proposal.
- A new senior pastor may otherwise have views that differ from those of our congregation.
- The North Texas Conference could lock the congregation out of the church property or otherwise restrict the congregation’s use of the church property or confiscate the property.

As a matter of church and civil law, the United Methodist Church, not individual congregations, own the church property. The congregation holds the church property in trust for the denomination. See Paragraph 2501 of the Book of Discipline.

From an ecclesiastical perspective, the North Texas Conference does not have an interest in evicting a congregation and having an empty church building. Aside from the negative publicity of such an eviction and of an empty United Methodist church building, as a practical matter, we do not believe there are new congregations or congregations-to-be, or mature congregations without buildings which would have the financial capability to operate a significant church property.

Recommendation of the Marriage Committee to the Church Council on Conducting Same-Sex Marriages at Oak Lawn United Methodist Church

From an economic perspective, the North Texas Conference itself wants a healthy and intact congregation in place with a fully operational church so that it can continue paying its apportionments. OLUMC has a record of paying its apportionments, on time, every year.

- The North Texas Conference could take one or more other punitive actions against Oak Lawn.

For example, a ban on delegates from Oak Lawn attending annual conferences or being eligible for selection as delegates to general conferences, a ban on Oak Lawn members attending North Texas Conference events, or generally anything that might limit Oak Lawn's input in the North Texas Conference or the benefits it derives from the North Texas Conference.

We are not aware of specific authority for any such punitive actions or any specific examples within the North Texas Conference (or other conferences).

Actions with punitive effect could be taken without being directly or expressly connected to the marriage issue.

- We may have members leave the church because we approve the marriage proposal.
- We may have members leave the church because of the possible risks involved in approving the marriage proposal and/or celebrating same-sex marriages in our church.
- We may have members withdraw all or part of their financial support because we approve the marriage proposal.
- We may have members withdraw all or part of their financial support because of the possible risks involved in approving the marriage proposal and/or celebrating same-sex marriages in our church.

What are possible consequences if we do not consider or approve a proposal to permit the conduct and celebration of all marriages in our church?

- We cannot be the church that we profess to be — an all-inclusive church — without addressing this issue as part of full equality for LGBTQ+ members and the broader LGBTQ+ community.
- Moreover, this is a theological issue, as well as an issue of equality and inclusion. Our relationship with God, through our understanding of the teachings of Jesus and Paul, is not the same if we continue to exclude a growing and visible segment of our brothers and sisters from the opportunity to know the love of God and the full acceptance of Christ Jesus. We cannot be truly loving our neighbors if we continue to exclude them from the Kingdom of God.
- We may have members, whether LGBTQ+ or other, supportive members, leave the church because we fail to act.
- We may have members, whether LGBTQ+ or other, supportive members, withdraw all or part of their financial support because we fail to act.

As you can readily see, there are risks and consequences for acting, or not acting, on this question. After much discussion and consideration, we asked ourselves: "What would you sacrifice for this issue?" Our answer was clear, "We would give up our church building, if necessary, for the ministry to our people, our neighbors, in our community."

Recommendation of the Marriage Committee to the Church Council on Conducting Same-Sex Marriages at Oak Lawn United Methodist Church

Other Evidence for Our Recommendation

In addition to our consideration of the equity and theological issues, and in our taking into account the potential risks and consequences of both action and inaction, we also looked to other foundational documents of the United Methodist Church for support.

Article 4 of the Constitution of the United Methodist Church states, “The United Methodist Church is a part of the church universal, which is one Body in Christ. The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth. All persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, upon baptism be admitted as baptized members, and upon taking vows declaring the Christian faith, become professing members in any local church in the connection. In the United Methodist Church, no conference or other organizational unit of the Church shall be structured so as to exclude any member or any constituent body of the Church because of race, color, national origin, status or economic condition.”

The Social Principles of the United Methods Church continue, “Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to supporting those rights and liberties for all persons, regardless of sexual orientation. We see a clear issue of simple justice in protecting the rightful claims where people have shared material resources, pensions, guardian relationships, mutual powers of attorney, and other such lawful claims typically attendant to contractual relationships that involve shared contributions, responsibilities, and liabilities, and equal protection before the law. Moreover, we support efforts to stop violence and other forms of coercion against all persons, regardless of sexual orientation.”

We view these statements as fundamental calls for equal treatment of ALL persons in the United Methodist Church. They appear to be in direct conflict with the sections condemning homosexuality, banning the ordination of LGBTQ+ clergy, or forbidding same-sex marriages. Coupled with our other understandings, expressed above, we see the United Methodist Church not only as out of step with present-day culture and society, but also out of step with itself.

The Book of Discipline, however, in contravention of this fundamental Constitutional principle and of its own otherwise inclusive provisions, includes blatantly discriminatory provisions in an attempt to exclude LGBTQ+ members from the full life of the church, both generally and with specific application to the solemnization or celebration of marriage. Specifically, paragraph 341.6 of the Book of Discipline states that “Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches.” Paragraph 341.6 discriminates against same-sex couples and is inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus Christ, as well as our Constitution. We recognize that United Methodists are not in agreement on these matters. We believe, however, that under our Constitution the conduct and celebration of marriage, including same-sex marriages, should be permitted on the property of a church.

Recommendation of the Majority of the Marriage Committee

We believe that it is appropriate for our clergy, our church leadership, and our trustees to know the mind of our congregation on these important matters, both for our church and our denomination.

As a congregation, we therefore reaffirm our commitment to working within the denomination to change the Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church so that it may be consistent with the teachings of Jesus Christ and our Constitution. We also commit to supporting and honoring legal marriages, including same-sex marriages, in the same way. We fully recognize and assume the known and unknown risks associated with these

Recommendation of the Marriage Committee to the Church Council on Conducting Same-Sex Marriages at Oak Lawn United Methodist Church

commitments, because we are called upon by God, through Jesus Christ, to be true to the teachings of Jesus Christ and to our mission and to resist injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves, as promised in the sacrament of baptism and the rite of confirmation in The United Methodist Church.

We therefore resolve that our congregation, the congregation of Oak Lawn United Methodist Church, will support and honor marriages of couples licensed to be married on an equal basis, regardless of gender. We offer and approve the use of our church property, including our sanctuary, equally for ceremonies of legal marriage, including same-sex marriages.

We recognize that any of our clergy who individually choose to minister fully to “all persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition” by celebrating such marriages may do so, but nothing in our recommendation requires, directs, or encourages them to conduct same-sex marriages. However, should our clergy decide to celebrate such marriages, we shall support them.

We recognize that standing up for our beliefs and principles is not without risk, yet we commit that we will continue to support Oak Lawn United Methodist Church through our vow of membership, with our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. We, nevertheless, ask our church leadership and trustees, in the implementation of this congregational resolution, to take all reasonable and appropriate steps to identify and, if possible, mitigate any adverse consequences to our church and to our clergy.

We ask that God guide the expression and exercise of our faith and decisions of our congregation, so that we may actively participate in bringing the light of God’s unconditional love to all.

Therefore, we ask the Church Council to approve the Marriage Committee’s recommendation to conduct and celebrate the unions of couples licensed to be married, without regard to gender or sexual orientation, in Oak Lawn United Methodist Church facilities. Further, we ask the Church Council to move this resolution to a full vote of the congregation at a called session of the Church Conference, at the earliest possible date.

Recommendation of the Minority of the Marriage Committee

Two of the six Marriage Committee members dissented from the majority proposal. They recommended that we allow the *Commission on a Way Forward* and the Council of Bishops time to complete the work they have already begun. The recommendations of the Council of Bishops will be voted on by the General Conference in February, 2019.

Therefore, added to this report is the minority recommendation, which is to consider retaining the Oak Lawn United Methodist Church’s marriage policy until after the Commission on the Way Forward releases its decision and/or the 2019 General Conference acts.