

An Open Letter to Members and Leaders of the United Methodist Church

Posted June 28, 2021

For nearly fifty years, The United Methodist Church (UMC) has officially discriminated against LGBTQIA+ persons in doctrine, policy, and practice. In these five decades, the UMC has denied God's calling of Queer people to ordained ministry, revoked Queer clergypersons' orders, refused to bless Queer relationships in ceremonies of Christian marriage, and spoken vile lies about Queer lives from the floor of General Conference. The UMC's intention that "all persons are individuals of sacred worth" has been rendered hollow by its sinister anti-gay teachings and its inflammatory silence in the presence of physical violence and spiritual harm. The Church has been and remains complicit in the suicides, beatings, and murders

For nearly half a century, many faithful saints attempted to change this denomination's damning policies, but to no avail. Nearly ten years ago, Love Prevails was formed because the usual approaches of legislation-writing, storytelling, holy conferencing, and relationship-building had failed to halt the steady advance of intolerance. Following the Spirit's leading "to do a new thing," we engaged in a three-dimensional strategy to challenge and abolish the UMC's policies and practices of discrimination against Queer lives. Our goal was to Disclose, Divest, and Disrupt until the log of "incompatibility" was removed from the eye of the UMC.

During this decade, Love Prevails consistently showed up and challenged the powerbrokers of this denomination (see a list of activities below). We believed in the possibility that this time (or at least, over time) direct-action witness would stir institutional change.

We were mistaken.

Despite our best efforts to engage the Council of Bishops, the Connectional Table, the Commission on a Way Forward, General Conference delegates, and numerous Boards and Agencies to act with justice, we, like our faithful predecessors, failed to effect positive change. Instead, we were consistently dismissed as an unwelcome distraction.

The behavior and attitudes of those openly opposed to us were no more hurtful than the quiet words of encouragement whispered in empty hallways by progressive leaders – a fearful lot, content with closets and unholy concessions, whose words were never coupled with public, liberative action.

While these leaders tinkered with plans that allowed just the right amount of discrimination to still be palatable to average United Methodists, the hard right successfully passed more crushingly oppressive legislation and the church's collective heart hardened against us. It has become clear: the UMC is satisfied to sacrifice some of its most vulnerable members in the most hostile places – in the United States and around the world. Nothing more visibly illuminates the moral bankruptcy of this denomination.

Love Prevails has come to the painful conclusion that the UMC's leadership and methods are so corrupt that we must replace "Disclose, Divest, and Disrupt" with one final word ... "Depart." Many of us in Love Prevails have spent most of our ministries trying to provide opportunities for education, change, and prophetic courage – but no longer will we invest our treasure, talent, time, or energy in trying to reform a denomination which has neither the desire nor the capacity for such transformation.

We once thought the church's proclamations of grace were simply ironic, but now we understand them to be wicked hypocrisy. We wrongly assumed that the UMC would eventually change its policies and welcome Queer people, if only out of institutional preservation. We failed to realize that the church would rather destroy itself than become fully inclusive. And now, because we hold no hope that the UMC will live out its highest stated values, we cannot counsel anyone of good conscience to remain in this denomination.

While we are thankful for the many who have supported our work of consciousness-raising and direct-action, we repent that our presence and persistence sent a damaging message to Queer folk and our allies that hate and spiritual harm should be endured. We deeply apologize for the ways we encouraged others to stay in the battle longer than was healthy for them.

It is time to shake the dust from our sandals and find new ways to partner with God's good news. With this open letter, Love Prevails releases itself from the UMC denomination which, for its entire existence, has proved to be an adversary of grace and justice for God's Queer people. As we move ahead, our grief has ebbed and our capacity for creative ministry and new life is being refreshed. We offer deep gratitude to those who have gone before us and illuminated our path out!

Sincerely,

Laci Lee Adams [white/cis/queer, she/her – Laci fell in love with the UMC as a teenager, received a B.A. in Religious Studies with a certification in Church Careers at Centenary College of Louisiana, graduated with a M.A.S.M in Spiritual Direction and Religious Leadership at Iliff School of Theology. She attended the past 5 General Conferences, co-facilitated FLAME (Iliff's queer caucus group) and served on the MoSAIC and Affirmation boards. Seminary educated, but unordained as an out queer person, Laci has served as a Unitarian Universalist religious professional since 2017 after being radically welcomed and affirmed by First Parish in Brookline, MA (UUA).]

David E. Braden [white/cis/gay, he/him – Born, baptized, raised and confirmed United Methodist, Lay Leader, Northern Illinois Annual Conference Lay Delegate, Northern Illinois GBHEM committee member and campus ministry liaison, North Central Jurisdictional Conference Delegate, GBHEM Board Member and Chair of the Committee on Racial and Ethnic Concerns, former Reconciling Ministries Network staff member—all before age 30—and now unchurched.]

Dr. Deborah Buffton [white/cishet, she/her – Daughter of a United Methodist pastor, actively involved in local UMCs for many years. Served on COSROW in the Wisconsin Conference, and

a member of Kairos CoMotion for many years. Left the UMC in 2003; currently participates in a Unitarian Universalist Fellowship.]

Joy L. Butler: [white/cishet, she/her – Fourth generation Methodist (North GA & Rio TX), 11 years working on LGBTQIA+ inclusion in church and society, RMN “Voices in the Wilderness” laity award (2015). Invited out of the UMC in 2020, currently an active LMX collaborator]

Rev. Amy E. DeLong [white/cis/lesbian, she/her – Born and raised UCC, Amy gave her heart to the the United Methodist Church while in college. Believing it was possible for the UMC to live into its noblest proclamations of love and grace, she offered the best years of her life and all the years of her ministry advocating for LGBTQIA+ justice. An ordained Elder in the Wisconsin Annual Conference, she attended five General Conferences and is a former conference co-chair of COSROW, Jurisdictional Conference Delegate, MFSA National Board Member, author of “The Loyal Opposition,” Co-founder of Kairos CoMotion, Love on Trial, and Love Prevails, survivor of a church trial, and recipient of several UM awards. Left ministry in the UMC in 2021.

Rev. Will Green [white/cis/gay, he/him – Left the United Methodist Church at the end of 2020. He was at the last 5 General Conferences, served on the RMN and GBHEM boards, and was very active in the New England Annual Conference. Will is the pastor of New Brackett Church on Peaks Island in Maine, which disaffiliated from the denomination as well. In 2021, the congregation and pastor are entering into a relationship with both the UCC and the UUA.]

Rev. Sue Laurie [white/cis/lesbian, she/her – 2020-21 Garrett-ETS Distinguished Alum Award (class of 1995), 2016 General Conference, affirmation and ordination by grassroots authority, 2001 – 2009 National Outreach Coordinator for Reconciling Ministries Network, 2000 as a spokesperson for the AMAR coalition, arrested at the Cleveland General Conference. Inspired by those who live and contribute in harsh, anti-queer geographies.]

Laura Ralston [white/cis/lesbian, she/her – Illinois Great Rivers Conference (IGRC) lay delegate (~1997-2006), IGRC CCYM District President (2000-2001), Wesley Foundation at the University of Illinois Peer Minister (2001-2005), President of the IGRC United Methodist Student Movement (2004-2005), US-2 Missionary with the General Board of Global Ministries (2005-2007), Middle School Camp Dean for the New Mexico Conference UMC (2009-2011), Board Member & Treasurer of the Wesley Foundation of the University of New Mexico (2009-2011), District Youth Coordinator of the New Mexico Conference UMC (2009-2011), New Mexico Conference lay delegate (~2009-2011), Iliff Student Senate Co-Chair (2012-2013), Love Prevails (2013-present). Seminary-educated and not ordained. Currently unchurched.]

Dr. Mary Lou Taylor [white/cishet, she/her – Fourth generation Methodist, board member of Kairos Co-Motion, active member of Love On Trial and Love Prevails. Former chair of Missions Committee, Chancel Choir, LGBT Advocacy Group, Environmental Concerns Committee and Church Council president at Whitefish Bay UMC. Currently churched by nature.]

Dr. Julie Todd [white/cishet, she/her – Born and raised united methodist, third generation methodist clergy, educated at all um-related higher ed institutions, methodist missionary in

hiroshima, japan, ordained in new england conference 1996, did all kinds of institutional things in resistance to white racism and queer oppression, finally divested elders orders in 2019, currently living my best life in grassroots spiritual community in lawrence, massachusetts.]

Brenda Smith White [white/cishet, she/her – Formerly served as Chair of Wisconsin Conference Council on Ministries, Co-Chair of Conference COSROW, Chair of NW District Committee on District Superintendency, Vice-President of Conference UMW and in several roles in district UMW organization. Advocate for LGBTQIA+ justice and full inclusion in UMC, Founding Member of Kairos CoMotion and Love Prevails. Currently attending UU Fellowship.]

Rev. Wesley White [white/cishet, he/him – Ordained Elder, Student-body President of Garrett Theological Seminary, Wisconsin Delegate to multiple General and Jurisdictional Conferences, WUMFSA Perry Saito and Wisconsin Status and Role of Women awards for inclusion, Certified Intentional Interim Minister. Still carrying the identity of UM as an albatross to remind me of structural harm.]

A Sampling of our Actions:

Shut down General Conference until anti-Queer, anti-Trans legislation was removed from the agenda. (Tampa, 2012)

Moved the Connectional Table to break their agenda and open a discussion about human sexuality. (Nashville, 2013)

Witness at the trial of Rev. Frank Schaefer in East Pennsylvania Annual Conference. (2013)

Raised the question that led the Connectional Table to pass a motion to remove the “incompatibility” language from the Book of Discipline (though the motion passed overwhelmingly, the Connectional Table never acted on it). (Chicago, 2014)

Invited by representatives of the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table to meet for conversation with traditionalist representatives. Members of Love Prevails, RMN, and MFSA arrived to learn that the conservatives had backed out of the meeting at the last minute. (Chicago, 2014)

Excluded from being present for the panel on sexuality. (Oklahoma City, 2014)

Invited into conversation with Discipleship Ministries and received a confession that the “funding ban” had caused them to self-censor their publications relating to human sexuality and spiritual growth. (Nashville, 2015)

Asked a key question at a Commission on General Conference that prevented General Conference from being held in a country where it was unsafe for Queer people to attend. (Portland, 2015)

Discussed issues of inclusiveness in communications with UMComm staff at their invitation. (Chicago, 2016)

Participated in pre-General Conference panel and witness. (Portland, OR, 2016)

Provided non-violent, direct-action training at General Conference (Portland, 2016)

Met with two recent presidents of the Council of Bishops and with all Bishops who were to become members of the Commission on a Way Forward prior to its first gathering. Advocated clearly for 50% queer representation on that Commission. Our demands were ignored and queer representation was not increased. (St. Simon's Island, 2016)

While present at the Council of Bishops at their annual meeting, requested the Arthur J. Moore Methodist Museum and Library to more accurately portray John Wesley's encounter with Native Americans and the United Methodist Church's historic relationship with enslaved people. (St. Simons Island, GA, 2016)

First meeting of the Commission on a Way Forward, continued to demand more and diverse LGBTQ+ voices. Told by a bishop that we had been locked out of the building so the Commission could "create sacred space." (Atlanta, 2017)

Endured being shut out of United Methodist buildings and bathroom facilities and being policed (sometimes by armed guards and sometimes by JustPeace) while meetings were being held about the presence of Queer people in the UMC. (Oklahoma City 2014, Atlanta 2017, Glenview, IL 2017, St. Louis, 2019)

Helped defeat the segregationist One Church Plan at special session of General Conference. (St. Louis, 2019)

Participated in a General Board of Higher Education and Ministry colloquy on missio dei and published Nothing About Us Without Us: LGBTQ Liberation and The United Methodist Church. (2017, Boston)

Submitted proposals imploring the UMC to allow a significant representation of Queer persons in meetings and commissions where the future of Queer people in the church was being discussed. Each of these attempts failed.

Wrote numerous position pieces and letters – still available on our website (loveprevailsุมc.com) and Facebook page (facebook.com/loveprevailsุมc).