

A Post General Conference Reflection

Jesus said, A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. (John 13:24).

It is too early to assess the work of this General Conference, but the headlines and early reports have told us that a lot of good, amazing work was done by the hard-working delegates. A lot of restrictive language was removed from the Discipline and doors were opened for greater ministries.

As someone who has taught consistently that our primary task as Christians is to know Christ and to apply his teachings and example to our lives, I saw in many of the Conference's actions an attempt to reach out to the lost, the least, and those who have been excluded. To me, it seems this Conference was attempting to fulfill Jesus' command referenced above – loving one another in the manner Christ loves us.

The removal of the restrictions on LGBTQ persons regarding ministry, funding for ministries and marriage take the church back to where we were in the late 1980's, before we started breaking into our "confessional" and "moderate" or "progressive" camps. In those days and in prior days, determinations on such matters were made on the local level.

With the action of this General Conference, it is again left to a pastor to decide when she/he will officiate a marriage and it is left to the local church to decide what marriages will occur in their facilities.

In similar fashion, full authority was returned to the Annual Conferences to determine who qualifies for ordination, while expecting that such persons "have a personal faith in Christ and be committed to Christ as Savior and Lord," and that they "make a complete dedication of themselves to the highest ideals of the Christian life," among other requirements. Hopefully, we can move to a place where we look at calling and character rather than labels in making our discernments.

GenConf2020/2024 also voted to give sacramental rights to the Order of Deacons in the church. This means that those who have been ordained to a ministry of Word and Service now have responsibility and rights to provide the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion for their people.

As a GC delegate in 2008, I was able to work on the adoption of some first steps for this change, allowing Deacons to provide the sacraments under special situations. It is deeply gratifying to see the successful work of gifted leaders fully opening the doors of inclusion for this order of ministry in the church.

These are simply some of my immediate reflections I wanted to share with you. There's a lot more to consider and I know that we at Union are not "of one mind" regarding several of the issues General Conference addressed. But that, of course, is part of what it means to be a United Methodist – we can disagree and still share faith in Christ and love another as Christ instructed us to do.

I am planning to use my sermon on Sunday, May 19th, to speak about how the General Conference changes affect our life together and our ministry. I covet your prayers for me as I pray and prepare for that message. And I encourage you to share your questions with me (stephen@unionirmo.org) or with other leaders in our church.

Our church leadership has repeatedly stated that Union seeks to be fully United Methodist, Bible-based, engaged in ministry and missions and inclusive of all persons. In other words, we are committed to find ways to live into these General Conference changes by loving one another as Christ has loved us.

I am grateful to be with you on this journey of discipleship. -Stephen