



The United Methodist Church
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**“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God;
everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”**

1 John 4:7 NRSV

As bishops of The United Methodist Church in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, we urge our state leaders to pass the Pennsylvania Non-Discrimination Act (SB/HB 300).

Since 1955, our state has recognized that certain groups of people have experienced unjust discrimination and has acted to protect them through the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act, which states:

“The practice or policy of discrimination against individuals or groups by reason of their race, color, familial status, religious creed, ancestry, age, sex, national origin, handicap or disability, use of guide or support animals because of the blindness, deafness or physical handicap of the user or because the user is a handler or trainer of support or guide animals is a matter of concern of the Commonwealth. Such discrimination foments domestic strife and unrest, threatens the rights and privileges of the inhabitants of the Commonwealth, and undermines the foundations of a free democratic state.”

For decades, we as United Methodist Christians have been protected from unjust discrimination by this act of law. Because of our commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ, we have historically sought to advocate for full equality under the law for other groups which experience routine discrimination.

It is long past time to acknowledge that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people have experienced routine discrimination because of who they are. There are no federal or state laws to protect LGBT people from being fired from their jobs, evicted from their homes, or refused services at a business because of who they are. We must act to protect them by updating the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act to include sexual orientation and gender identity or expression.

The United Methodist Church is having painful and complex conversations within our tradition about the morality of same-sex relationships. At the same time, we have been very clear that the LGBT people in our congregations, families, workplaces, and communities have sacred worth as children of God and should experience the freedom and dignity of participating in civil society as equals under the law.

The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church contain our official teachings on this matter of civil equality:

“We affirm all persons as equally valuable in the sight of God. We therefore work toward societies in which each person’s value is recognized, maintained, and strengthened. We support the basic rights of all persons to equal access to housing, education, communication, employment, medical care, legal redress for grievances, and physical protection. We deplore acts of hate or violence against groups or persons based on race, color, national origin, ethnicity, age, gender, disability, status, economic condition, sexual orientation, gender identity, or religious affiliation.” (162.III)

Because of our faith and our desire to follow the example of Jesus Christ, we recognize that it is more important to treat one another with love and respect than it is to judge one another. In Paul’s letter to the Romans, we are reminded in the second chapter that it is not ours to judge others. Only God can judge the soul of a person.

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is often known as the ‘cradle of religious liberty.’ William Penn is quoted as saying, “We must give the liberty we seek.” It was here that religious freedom became a valued principle for American life as we learned to tolerate differences. We Methodists and many others have long had the freedom to worship God and live in society openly without fear of persecution. We must be careful not to strive to take that precious liberty away from others no matter our personal discomfort or moral disapproval.

Religious freedom means we have the right to our own personal beliefs about the moral issues related to sexual orientation or gender identity. Nothing in this proposed law challenges that and the same religious exemptions that have been in the law since 1955 already preserve our freedom to hire and celebrate marriages according to our church teachings.

However, it has never been the case that religious freedom has meant that we can impose our own religious beliefs on others outside of our church or restrict their liberty to live as equals in our communities. We encourage United Methodist business owners and landlords to treat LGBT employees, customers, and tenants with the same love, respect, and hospitality that Jesus offered to all he encountered.

We recognize that many of our members and others in society are struggling with changes in our civil laws related to marriage. Many of us understand marriage to be a relationship between one man and one woman bound together by God. Religious freedom allows us to retain that understanding within the context of our religious creeds and rituals.

The civil contract of marriage, however, is open to all in our society and has been recognized as a human right by the United Nations. Our society has decided to allow same-sex couples to have access to the more than 1000 legal benefits of civil marriage which protect these couples and their children.

In regard to same-sex relationships and civil law, *The Social Principles of the United Methodist Church* teaches:

“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.” (162.J)

Recent events have highlighted the discomfort some religious people experience about providing goods and services to same-sex couples seeking to be married. We believe that the obligation to love our neighbors by treating them with dignity and respect must be the first consideration. This is the core of the teaching of Jesus and is more important than any moral judgment we might make about the behavior of others. It is problematic to consider changing our laws to allow people to turn others away based on moral disapproval. When would such a law allow others to judge us and restrict our own liberty to live as equals in society?

Brothers and sisters, let us bear with one another in love and freedom. Let us recognize the unjust suffering experienced by our LGBT brothers and sisters when they are marginalized and dehumanized, and act to protect them from harm. Let us pray for our state legislators that they will have the wisdom and courage to do what is just, and let us lift up our voices to them in encouragement – because of our faith in the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Yours in Christ,

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