



November 20, 2019

Beloved Siblings, Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

In this Thanksgiving Letter, we, your pastors, want to give thanks for you, for the journey we have travelled together thus far, and for the future that lies before us. This Thanksgiving letter is addressed to all God's children whom we serve at First Church. During this season in our denomination's crisis, we are especially thankful for the presence, ministry and contributions of First Church's LGBTQIA++ members and friends. Thank God for you!

Five years ago, on August 21, 2014, the pastoral leadership of First Church sent a pastoral letter to the congregation stating clearly that "marriage equality is primarily an issue of pastoral care." Therefore, if asked, the clergy would perform weddings for any member of the congregation. On March 10, 2015, Church Council of First Church unanimously passed the resolution to recommend to the Senior Pastor that "the church building and/or property be made available for marriage ceremonies of all couples allowed to marry under Illinois state law (same-gender and different-gender couples). On March 11, 2015, the Senior Pastor sent a pastoral letter to the congregation approving the recommendation. First Church wedding policies were immediately revised to "explicitly welcome same gender weddings in our building."

We, your pastors, write to reaffirm the position of your clergy in 2015 and to remind you of the use of our building for all. We will counsel and officiate weddings for same-gender and opposite-gender couples, and we welcome all those weddings in our building.

The Traditional Plan that goes into effect on January 1, 2020, will impose punitive action against clergy who are LGBTQ and/or perform same-gender weddings. The mandatory minimum penalties are: a one-year suspension without pay for the first offense and termination of conference membership and church credentials for a second offense. Last week, on November 16, 2019, the Bishop of Northern Illinois Conference, Bishop Sally Dyck, announced that she "will not facilitate or move on toward trial complaints against LGBTQ clergy or clergy who perform same-gender weddings." Bishop Dyck will be retiring August 31, 2020, and the North Central Jurisdiction (NCJ) will gather on July 15-18, 2020, to elect bishops. NCJ released a statement on November 9, 2019, saying that they desire to elect bishops who will "covenant to a moratorium on complaints, charges, and trials related to officiating same-gendered weddings and LGBTQIA+ identity and credentialing."

We, your pastoral leaders appointed by the Bishop and Cabinet to First United Methodist Church, Evanston, have prayerfully discerned that God continues to call us to be in ministry with you. We are life-long Methodists and the vows of our ordination specify how we are to live out our baptismal covenant to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in all forms. We want to allay your concerns and fears for us. The Holy Spirit has given us clarity and a particular spiritual boldness to step into the future and accept whatever penalties and consequences await us in the Traditional Plan. We are not afraid.

We do not know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future; therefore, we can be fearless and joyful. Let us continue to pray for one another, encourage each other and celebrate God's expansive love. In this season of Thanksgiving, we give thanks for you all.

Grace Imathiu  
Elder and Senior Pastor

Jane Cheema  
Deacon and Pastor of  
Discipleship & Mission

Bonny Roth  
Deacon and Pastor of Pastoral  
Care & Faith Formation