

October 2016

To: Annual Conference Leadership Team and Council of District Executives

From: Supportive Communities Network members

Re: Annual Conference Directive

Dear Annual Conference Leadership Team and Council of District Executives:

At its best, Annual Conference is a place where we struggle together to find the mind of Christ, holding our differences in creative and healthy tension while respecting the integrity of one another’s struggle to be faithful to the leading of God’s Spirit.

With deep sadness, we note that Annual Conference is increasingly becoming an unpleasant experience of division, hostility and lack of civility. The lgbtq community has been the primary target, although not the sole recipient of this enmity. Of equal alarm to us is a trend within our denomination towards legalism and a forced conformity that seeks to punish and even expel dissenters.

As a tradition that was forged out of dissent, this coercive drive towards conformity should greatly disturb all of us. After all, the Jesus whom we claim to follow pushed against a harsh legalism that ignored the needs and struggles of people. Instead, he healed on the Sabbath, engaged with those on the margins, and shared stories that surprised and disrupted assumptions of power and authority. He showed us that dissent is one way that God does new things in the world. Yes, it can be unsettling. Yes, it can foster division. Yet to respond punitively out of fear and anxiety to silence the “offenders” may, paradoxically, put at risk the very faith that we think we are protecting. As Gamaliel counseled the early church in Acts: “…if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God!” (Acts 5:38-39)

Authoritarian acts of discipline, punishment and threat do not represent the church at its best. Our finest moments as a faith community have never been characterized by intimidation, threats of leaving, or forced expulsion. Enforced legalism is not the path of faithfulness. We strongly urge the Leadership Team and CODE to reject the use of coercive force and punitive responses to address the tensions that we are experiencing as a body of Christ.

Instead, we would counsel you to be very careful with the power that is entrusted to you and the Annual Conference. Acting in haste to silence and forcibly extinguish or shut down an uneasy conflict will not solve the challenges that confront us as a church. We affirm the counsel of the 2000 Annual Conference that called for education, consultation and patience in our relationships with one another.

Rather than making a decision about “the authority of Annual Conference regarding the accountability of ministers, congregations, and districts,” you have an opportunity to bring a different kind of clarity and guidance that does not rely upon punishment or threat. Education, consultation and patience can offer a path towards an authentic community; one that is built on right relationship and mutual respect. We understand that it is difficult to live in uncertainty and trust. Yet we cannot help but think that this is ultimately what will lead us to the unity that continues to elude us.

Finally, as we contemplate the situation in which the church finds itself we note a telling irony. The lgbt community, the group that has borne the brunt of hatred, fear and discrimination within the church, continues to reach out with hope. Given that it is lgbtq people who are among the most impacted in this situation, we implore you to make it a point to talk with them and find out what it means to them to be married by a pastor and with the blessing of the church. We suspect that you may be surprised by the responses. Without that input, this process has very little integrity. For far too many years we have done a great disservice to the lgbtq community by our failure to listen, understand, and respond with respect and care, even though this is a key element in the *1983 Paper on Human Sexuality*. This must stop. We can do better.

The Supportive Communities Network (SCN) of BMC has developed a set of principles, C*alled by Conscience*, which is included with this letter. This document outlines the Brethren and Biblical values that guide and direct us in our work; values that we think point to the best of our Brethren heritage, tradition and faith understanding. We offer this to you as a resource in your own discernment and also to indicate the perspective that we bring to our work and ministry.

You are being asked to adjudicate a problem that defies simple answers. The Annual Conference has set before you a challenging task in challenging times. As members of SCN, our experience over the decades has afforded us some unique insight and wisdom into the challenges that you face. Through our welcome and affirmation of the inherent goodness of lgbt people, we have experienced firsthand the mystery of God’s spirit moving among us as inclusive and committed communities of faith. We hope that one day the whole church will acknowledge this goodness, even as we now live in the tension of the not yet and the already.

Please feel free to contact us for conversation or clarification. You remain in our thoughts and prayers.

Courage and strength in the struggle,

**SCN Steering committee:**

Kurt Borgmann, Senior Pastor, Manchester (IN) COB

Susan Boyer, Senior Pastor, LaVerne (CA) COB

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**Congregations/organizations of SCN: (With many more in support, but unable to process the letter in a condensed time frame to add an official signature)**

Arlington (VA) COB

Beacon Heights (IN) COB

Common Spirit Grand Rapids (MI) COB

Common Spirit Minneapolis (MN) COB

Common Spirit North Manchester (IN) COB

Goshen City (IN) COB

LaVerne (CA) COB

Living Peace (OH) COB

Lower Miami (OH) COB

Manchester (IN) COB

Modesto (CA) COB

Open Circle (MN) COB

Open Table Cooperative

Portland Peace (OR) COB

San Diego (CA) COB

University Baptist Brethren Church (PA)

University Park (MD) COB Church Board

Womaen’s Caucus

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