

‘Safe harbor’ offered to LGBTQ Methodists

by [Emily McFarlan Miller](#) in the [December 4, 2019](#) issue



LGBTQ advocates react to the Traditional Plan being adopted at the UMC General Conference on Feb. 26, 2019, in St. Louis. (RNS photo/Kit Doyle)

The five bishops of the Western Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church have declared their churches a “safe harbor” for LGBTQ clergy.

The Safe Harbor Declaration was announced November 6 as the United Methodists’ Council of Bishops wrapped up its autumn meeting in Lake Junaluska, North Carolina. It comes weeks before new restrictions strengthening the denomination’s ban on the ordination and marriage of LGBTQ members take effect on January 1.

“We are haunted by the actions of the 2019 Special General Conference, which impose new and harmful definitions and restrictions on full participation of LGBTQ+ persons in the Church and abandon robust engagement of scripture to narrow biblical literalism,” the declaration states.

“We do not believe the United Methodist Church has the authority or the power to impose limits on the movement of God’s Holy Spirit in the lives of God’s beloved LGBTQ+ children.”

The restrictions are part of the so-called Traditional Plan approved in February 2019 by a special session of the General Conference, the denomination’s global decision-making body.

The Traditional Plan bars bishops from consecrating, ordaining, or commissioning “self-avowed practicing homosexuals,” even if they have been elected or approved by the appropriate church body. It prohibits those church bodies from approving or recommending them as candidates, as well.

The new policy also will make it easier to file complaints against LGBTQ United Methodists seeking to enter ministry and against clergy presiding over same-sex weddings, according to the bishops of the Western Jurisdiction. It strengthens current complaint procedures and penalties in the denomination’s rulebook, the Book of Discipline. A clergy member who performs a same-sex wedding will face a minimum one-year suspension without pay for the first offense and a loss of credentials for the second.

There is nothing else in the Book of Discipline that comes with a mandatory punishment, according to the bishops of the Western Jurisdiction.

The Western Jurisdiction will not withhold or challenge ordination based solely on a person’s gender identity or sexual orientation, according to the Safe Harbor Declaration. It also will not punish clergy who officiate the marriage of “two adults of any gender or sexual orientation,” the declaration states.

“At the same time, we recognize and will uphold the requirement that LGBTQ+ clergy, with all clergy, ‘maintain the highest standards of holy living’ in their personal and professional relationships,” the bishops state in the declaration.

On the jurisdiction’s website the bishops invited their fellow bishops, who make up the denomination’s Council of Bishops, to join them in signing the declaration during their autumn meeting. They’re hoping other United Methodists will sign online and act on it, as well. “The bishops of the Western Jurisdiction do not intend to act alone. We call upon the entire Church to offer safe harbor for LGBTQ+ clergy and laity to participate fully in the life of The United Methodist Church.”

The Western Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church is represented by five active bishops: Bishop Robert T. Hoshibata of the Phoenix Episcopal Area, Bishop Minerva G. Carcaño of the San Francisco Episcopal Area, Bishop Grant Hagiya of the Los Angeles Episcopal Area, Bishop Elaine J. W. Stanovsky of the Greater Northwest Episcopal Area, and Bishop Karen P. Oliveto of the Mountain Sky Episcopal Area. Oliveto was consecrated as the UMC's first openly LGBT bishop in 2016.

The Western Jurisdiction includes seven regional conferences, including the Alaska Conference, California-Nevada Conference, California-Pacific Conference, Desert Southwest Conference, Mountain Sky Conference, Oregon-Idaho Conference, and Pacific Northwest Conference. —Religion News Service