

LGBTQ United Methodists hope to build on 2024 gains

by [Heather Hahn](#)

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Izzy Alvaran (right) and others pray together on May 1, 2024, after the United Methodist general conference voted to remove the denomination's ban on the ordination of "self-avowed practicing" gay clergy. Alvaran is on the staff of the Reconciling Ministries Network. (File photo by Paul Jeffrey, UM News)

After decades of passionate advocacy, those supporting LGBTQ inclusion in the United Methodist Church finally achieved their goals at last year's general conference. With the advocates' persistent organizing and prayer, the international lawmaking assembly voted—[in some cases overwhelmingly](#)—to remove all language condemning homosexuality from the denomination's Book of Discipline. Actions included eliminating denomination-wide bans on gay clergy and same-sex marriage

as well as erasing [an anti-gay stance that dated back more than 50 years](#).

So what happens when at long last you have met your goals?

You set new ones.

That's what Reconciling Ministries Network has been doing [after more than 40 years at the forefront](#) of working to end the Discipline's restrictions against LGBTQ people. The advocacy group started this year with [a new structure](#) for its six-member staff and [a new "2528 Strategic Plan"](#) developed in the months since the general conference concluded on May 3, 2024.

"This is a moment that Reconciling United Methodists have dreamed of for decades," said Jan Lawrence, the advocacy group's executive director.

The strategic plan's name refers to the years 2025-2028, between general conference sessions.

The group remains independent of the United Methodist Church. However, Reconciling Ministries Network has long worked within the UMC. Staff hope changes made at last year's general conference will allow the group to work even more closely with United Methodist ministries [as the denomination resets](#) after decades of rancor over the place of LGBTQ people in church life.

In the years leading up to the recent general conference, about a quarter of the denomination's US congregations left under [a now-expired policy that allowed disaffiliations for "reasons of conscience" related to homosexuality.](#) The UMC is now in a rebuilding phase, and Reconciling Ministries Network hopes to play a role in the denomination's revival.

"We may have accomplished part of our reason for being," the Reconciling Ministries Network plan says. "But responding with love and authority to general conference decisions is a whole other matter."

The 2528 plan's four goals are to position Reconciling Ministries Network to equip and nurture congregations and faith communities on the path toward intersectional justice, to develop diverse, further-reaching communication channels, to serve as the key leader on LGBTQ+ matters and as an active, mutual partner with other organizations that share commitments to intersectional justice in the UMC, and to refine its own organization and infrastructure.

Lawrence said Reconciling Ministries Network is increasingly acting as a partner to United Methodist institutional organizations.

In the weeks after the general conference, she said, annual conferences—regional bodies consisting of multiple churches—and other ministries reached out with requests for trainings, educational resources, and guidance. Since then, RMN also has welcomed 35 new Reconciling ministries. Altogether, 1,439 churches and other ministries are now part of the Reconciling movement.

United Methodists who work with Reconciling Ministries Network have already seen strides toward inclusion in the immediate aftermath of the general conference.

Among them is Angie Cox, pastor of Livingston United Methodist Church in Columbus, Ohio.

Cox tried six times over five years to enter the process to become an ordained elder. Each time, members of the West Ohio Conference Board of Ordained Ministry told her she had the gifts to be a pastor, but church law against “self-avowed practicing” gay clergy prevented them from moving her forward. Cox and her wife have been married since 2016.

It was only on her sixth attempt after the general conference [ended the gay clergy ban](#) that the board approved her to become a provisional elder.

Throughout the long and often disappointing process, she said she could count on the support from the Reconciling Ministries Network. Livingston United Methodist Church voted to become a Reconciling church years before her appointment there.

For her congregation, she said, the general conference’s decisions serve as validation of the difficult decision to join the Reconciling movement in the first place.

“We keep believing that God works through folks that the church has tried to tell us God doesn’t want,” she said. “When you see that work in action, I think that’s really affirming and it gives or renews a sense of purpose in times where it’s kind of difficult to hold onto one.”

Greg Neal, senior pastor of Grace United Methodist Church in Des Moines, Iowa, also has seen his Reconciling church grow since the general conference last year. With help from the Reconciling Ministries Network, he was able to transfer to the Iowa Conference after his marriage to his husband led to his suspension in the North

Texas Conference, where he had served as a pastor for 31 years.

Now Neal not only serves as pastor but also as the first gay married elder on the Iowa Conference Board of Ordained Ministry.

Cox and Neal celebrate Reconciling Ministries Network's achievements. But both agree that more work for inclusion is needed and that the advocacy group is in a position to help with that work.

"The 2528 strategic plan, I think, is absolutely where RMN needs to be going," Neal said. "Just because we've obtained the wiping of the negative language of the Discipline, in no way, shape or form does that mean that we're done."

Practically speaking, he said what needs to be done right now is informing bishops, conference leaders, boards of ordained ministry, and congregations what LGBTQ clergy and clergy candidates have to offer the church.

"Rather than being viewed as problems or somebody we have to take care of," Neal said, "we are assets to our conferences and to our congregations, not in any way shape or form problems." —UM News