

A prayer-saturated "Open Letter" to Bishop Larry Goodpaster sent with the hope that his and our prayers and words will embrace and encourage the Judicial Council

October 12, 2010

Bishop Larry Goodpaster, President
United Methodist Council of Bishops

Dear Bishop Goodpaster,

I am writing this "Open Letter" to you as our Judicial Council prepares for its fall meeting. I write remembering a commercial that said something like, "Let Mikey eat it." Some of my United Methodist friends, who will remain nameless, have asked me to write you prior to the opening of the meeting of the Judicial Council. I hear them saying, "Let Gil write it."

I write because persons whom I know within and beyond the United Methodist Church have suggested that the actions and antics of one of the candidates for governor in New York, Carl P. Paladino, represent the dilemma United Methodism faces as we maintain our language and legislation prohibiting clergy from performing civil unions or marriages of same-sex couples in those places where they are legal. Candidate Paladino has said in language much coarser than that passed by the General Conference, but nevertheless carrying the same intent, that he is opposed to same-sex unions and marriages and is strident in his belief that homosexuality is unacceptable. I have been asked recently, "How is the United Methodist position on homosexuality and same-sex unions different from the position of Mr. Paladino? The United Methodist language may be less coarse, but the intent is the same."

But there is more. Mr. Paladino has been responsible for circulating—at best—racially insensitive and—at worst—racist pictures and words that are demeaning to those of us who are of African descent. His circulation of demeaning pictures of President Obama and his wife and an imagined picture of a "rehearsal" for the inauguration of President Obama are the most demeaning many of us have seen. Candidate Paladino has not restricted his circulation of racist attacks to the Obamas alone, he has also circulated among "his friends" other race-negative material.

There is a linkage between the heterosexism of today and the racism of the

past that, unfortunately, we find difficult to talk about. Mr. Paladino, through his demeaning depictions of both blacks and gay persons, provides a stark portrayal of the challenge we face as United Methodists. The same approach to Biblical interpretation that once justified racial segregation in Methodism is the same that now justifies discrimination against LGBT persons. The use of the Bible to prohibit interracial marriage in the past is now present in Biblical usage to prohibit same-sex unions and marriages.

Bishop Goodpaster, you have come to the presidency of the Council of Bishops for "such a time as this" (Esther). You know well the racial segregation of our native south. I am sure the death of Bishop James Mathews recently made you remember, as I did, that on Easter Sunday 1964, Bishop Charles Golden, a black bishop, and Bishop James Mathews, a white bishop, were turned away from Galloway Church in Jackson, Mississippi, because the Church had a racial segregation policy. It is difficult to remember that this and similar incidents were once "acceptable" in our beloved denomination.

Our present United Methodist policy and practice of separating, segregating, excluding and denying gay men and lesbians equal access and participation in the United Methodist Church is no different from that of our once denying the same to persons because of their race. How long will it take us to realize that on matters of injustice, "the more things change, the more they remain the same?"

It would seem that it is imperative that our Judicial Council explain how the current restrictions on gay persons and those who want to provide complete ministry to and on behalf of gay persons, differ from our once-accepted practice of restricting blacks in Methodism. The comparisons will be made until we respond to our restrictions on persons because of their sexual orientation as we finally responded to our restrictions on persons because of their racial identity. We did away with racial restrictions. Many of us believe the Spirit is compelling us to rid ourselves of our restrictions on persons because of their sexual orientation as well.

The abuse of gay persons, the suicide rate of gay persons—particularly young persons—the resistance to gay persons serving openly in the military, and the rantings and ravings of a gubernatorial candidate in New York all find justification in our present United Methodist language and legislation. We want to deny the connection, but the events of these

moments do not allow us to continue to be in denial.

I have been reminded continuously that our Judicial Council does not have the interpretation role that secular Supreme Courts have. They have found it difficult to rule that some majority decisions made by General Conferences about homosexuality, same-sex couples and ministry to same-sex couples are in conflict with our expressed understandings of ministry and the inclusivity of the United Methodist Church.

I believe the seriousness of this moment calls for the Council of Bishops and/or its President to speak a pastoral and encouraging word to our Judicial Council that will enable them to begin to free the United Methodist Church from the shackles of our punitive anti-gay language and legislation. If ever there was a time for us to heed these words of Harry Emerson Fosdick, it is now: "Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour."

Your brother in Christ,

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