

NCJ delegates name commitment to anti-racism, LGBTQIA+ inclusion

By Christa Meland, director of communications, Minnesota Conference

At a virtual North Central Jurisdictional (NCJ) Conference this week, delegates elected by their respective annual conferences created and overwhelmingly approved **a covenant** naming their commitment to anti-racism work and LGBTQIA+ inclusion.

Approximately 250 delegates participated in an official Zoom meeting Wednesday and Thursday, and others from across the 10-conference jurisdiction watched it live online. Delegates spent the majority of their time on three big topics of conversation—dismantling racism, the future of episcopal leadership, and the future of The United Methodist Church.

On Thursday morning, by a vote of 135-32, they approved a “Covenant to Build Beloved Community” developed by a six-person writing team determined by the heads of the NCJ delegations. The covenant, written using United Methodist baptismal vows as a framework, calls on the jurisdiction to work to end racism and to create a culture that welcomes and affirms LGBTQIA+ people.

Specifically, the covenant calls on the NCJ bishops of color to convene all BIPOC delegates to discuss how to begin to address trauma in communities of color, requests the Mission Council to report on how their budget incorporates anti-racism work, urges all members of the NCJ to avoid pursuing charges for LGBTQIA+ clergy, and requests that episcopal leaders dismiss charges related to LGBTQIA+ identity or officiating same-gender weddings. The covenant also stipulates that the Mission Council must designate NCJ funds to work with conference anti-racism teams to create a racial analysis at the local church and conference levels—and to align annual conference budgets with antiracism work and intentional efforts geared toward people and communities of color.

“The shaping of our covenant was based on our baptismal covenant, and baptism isn’t an ending; it’s a beginning,” said Zaagsma, a clergy member of the Minnesota Conference who was on the writing team. “This covenant represents a new beginning for our North Central Jurisdiction, and I think it shows that grace and love are stronger than the challenges we face.”

Rev. Andy Call, a clergy delegate from the East Ohio Conference, also sees the covenant as a step forward for the jurisdiction.

“For the last two-and-a-half years, The United Methodist Church has been defined largely by the voices of those preparing to leave,” he said. “The North Central Jurisdiction took steps this week to articulate the values of the jurisdiction going forward that I hope will inspire those who have been left out or left behind.”

Rev. Duane Carlisle, a clergy delegate from the Indiana Conference, said he's grateful to have left the gathering with a vision to bring back to local churches as they dream and look to the future.

“My hope is that what we have borne in these two days will offer United Methodists across our connection a vision for ministry and a place where everyone can see their own unique gifts and callings reflected in its affirmations,” he said. “What the NCJ has accomplished in these last two days is evidence that we can be that place of radical love with a resolute posture leaning into justice and care for creation.”

The covenant requests the Mission Council, in conjunction with the NCJ College of Bishops, “develop an exercise for NCJ delegates to engage in conversation to understand the impact of homophobia, transphobia and heterosexism within United Methodist Churches during the next meeting of the jurisdiction.”

The writing team that developed the covenant waded through 54 pages of comments from delegates in order to find out what was particularly important to them. The five key priorities they named, which shaped the document, were: anti-racism, inclusion, amicable separation, regionalism, and connectionalism.

“Just as our baptism is one step in a lifelong journey of faith, this covenant is one step in a journey toward being the Beloved Community that God calls us to be,” said Rev. Brian Gilbert, a clergy delegate from the Northern Illinois Conference who was on the writing team. “A critical part in this process is our antiracist work...It is my hope that by having the jurisdiction gather together multiple groups from across all of our annual conferences, we will be able to promote a spirit of collegiality and idea sharing that will allow each conference to adopt policies, strategies, and visions that will unite us together in the work of being antiracist.”

Nitza Dovenspike, a lay member of the Iowa Conference who was also on the covenant writing team, is personally grateful that the delegates lifted up anti-racism work as a priority and as a call to action. “We recognized the importance of actionable recommendations to continue the journey on eliminating racism,” she said after the covenant was adopted. “My hope is that we, individually and collectively, continue to pay attention to the nudges of the Holy Spirit and remember that God does not withhold goodness from us.”

Regarding amicable separation, the document encourages conferences and local churches to strive for reconciliation and understanding. But for those that “may feel called to a different future in the faith,” it stipulates that annual conferences should “use existing disciplinary and conference provisions to accommodate local congregations seeking disaffiliation.”

Delegates spent more than two hours discussing and refining the covenant before approving it. NCJ bishops were formally asked to rule on whether some of the specific language about LGBTQIA+ individuals and same-gender weddings—namely, the call to avoid and dismiss charges

—restricts the rights of bishops or other leaders from upholding the Book of Discipline and thus is null and void. The bishops have 30 days to respond.

In addition to approving the covenant itself, delegates also voted 131-31 to affirm the recent Council of Bishops document called [“A Narrative for the Continuing United Methodist Church”](#) and 128-31 to affirm [“A Call to Grace,”](#) a grassroots open letter that all United Methodists were invited to sign.

“Covenanting to Build the Beloved Community, we look to 2024 with promise,” the covenant stated at the end. “We pledge ourselves to God’s call upon our lives, to each other, and to the future of The United Methodist Church.”