



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Dear Members and Friends of the Desert Southwest Conference,

Grace and peace to you in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ, our Risen Savior!

I am sharing some thoughts with you about a matter of great importance following the election, consecration, and assignment of Bishop Karen Oliveto last July. After Bishop Oliveto had been elected by the Western Jurisdiction Conference, the South Central Jurisdiction asked for a ruling by the Judicial Council, the Supreme Court of The United Methodist Church. The request was for a ruling that the Judicial Council determine whether Bishop Oliveto's election was valid. The Judicial Council will conduct a hearing on this matter when it meets in Newark, New Jersey on April 25. Following the hearing and deliberations, a ruling is expected within a few days following a process that is outlined in paragraphs 2610 and 2612 in the 2016 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church.

Your bishops of the Western Jurisdiction share with you prayerfully that we believe that Bishop Oliveto's election, consecration, and assignment to lead the Mountain Sky Area is valid. More than that, we believe that it is a demonstration of the movement of God's Spirit that led the delegates to the Western Jurisdiction Conference to elect Bishop Oliveto. We, therefore, are hopeful that the Judicial Council decision will confirm this by its decision.

In my experience as your bishop, I know that there exists a broad range of beliefs about this matter. There are good and faithful United Methodists on both sides of the question before the Judicial Council. The conversations at our Holy Huddles on Church Unity confirmed this! The overwhelming majority of the persons who shared their beliefs and faith were hopeful that we could find a way to work to bridge our differences and be unified as a body of Christ despite our differences. The overwhelming majority voice felt that our United Methodist Church was like a big tent or a house with many rooms, where we could live together, focused on mission and ministry as our source of unity. We believe that God is calling us to this unity despite our differences.

There are several potential outcomes of the Judicial Council ruling. The decision will have significant implications for the entire denomination. And the ruling will be important for us in the Desert Southwest Conference. But our sisters and brothers in Christ in the Mountain Sky Area, and Bishop Oliveto will be most affected by whatever the Judicial Council decides. For this reason, I ask you to hold them in your prayers.

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The Western Jurisdiction has prepared some helpful information that I would like to encourage you to share with your congregations as soon as possible. Following the public announcement of the Judicial Council's ruling, more information for our churches and leaders will be offered so that we can lead our church together.

I know that whatever the outcome of the Judicial Council is, there will not be uniformity of agreement or acceptance in our Conference and throughout the denomination. There will be a wide range of feelings, and there will be some who can no longer remain as a part of our church. In these moments, leaning on our faith and our common call to be in ministry to all persons may help us to pause to listen to what God is saying to us. Above all, I am hopeful that we will lean on God and that we will hear again the promise: Do not be afraid, for I am with you.

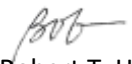
In a time such as this, we must remember the reassuring wisdom of John Wesley who said, "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may."

Although the ruling of the Judicial Council will have significant implications for us as we seek to be the Church together, I hope that our faith will strengthen our resolve to work together for the future of our United Methodist Church. We are no stranger to disagreement and challenges to our unity. In fact, we have found that when we pause to ask prayerfully for God's help in time of distress, God does not disappoint us. And so we have faith, or we must have faith that God will guide us in this critical moment.

I will be traveling to New Jersey to be with many of our Western Jurisdiction bishops to be a support for a colleague bishop whom I respect as a strong leader with a clear call and profound faith. I ask you to please hold Bishop Oliveto in prayer along with the laity and clergy of the Mountain Sky Area, members of the Judicial Council, and all those who will speak their heart before the Judicial Council as it meets on April 25.

In Christ's love,




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Western Jurisdiction Information About the Challenge to Bishop Oliveto's Election:

1. **What is the case involving Bishop Karen Oliveto?** Just after she was elected by the Western Jurisdictional Conference, and as they were preparing to adjourn after their own election of bishops, delegates in the South Central Jurisdictional Conference, meeting in Wichita, Kansas, voted to ask The United Methodist Judicial Council "is the nomination, election, consecration, and/or assignment as a bishop of The United Methodist Church of a person who claims to be a "self-avowed practicing homosexual" or is a spouse in a same-sex marriage lawful under The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church."

It is important to understand the questions of law raised to the Judicial Council aren't complaints against Bishop Oliveto as an individual. They were directed to the Western Jurisdiction and its process to elect a bishop in July 2016. Bishop Oliveto was an elder in good standing as a candidate for the episcopacy, and was eligible for election. Her status as an open, married lesbian was known at the time. She was elected by an 88-0-12 vote on the 17th ballot and consecrated by the full College of Bishops.

2. **What is the Judicial Council?** The Judicial Council is the highest judicial body or court of The United Methodist Church. Its nine members are elected by the General Conference. They are from the U.S. Europe, Africa, and the Philippines. They follow rules of procedure, in some ways reflecting U.S. judicial processes, that are set out in the Book of Discipline. They act on appeals, questions of law, requests for declaratory decisions, and whether acts by official bodies of the church conform with the Book of Discipline. The Judicial Council meets twice annually.
3. **What is the status of the case?** Representatives of the South Central Jurisdiction and the Western Jurisdiction College of Bishops, and a number of other interested parties, have filed briefs in the matter. The Judicial Council will hear two hours of oral arguments on Tuesday, April 25 in Newark, N.J. at the beginning of its Spring 2017 meeting. It is expected to issue a decision in the matter at the end of its meeting in April 28 or shortly afterwards.
4. **What are the potential outcomes?** It's difficult to predict exactly what the Judicial Council will do, but there is a range of possible scenarios for its decision. The Judicial Council could:
 - Accept the argument of the Western Jurisdiction that it has no jurisdiction in this case because church law gives authority to determine the credentials and qualifications of pastors and bishops solely to annual (regional) conferences and jurisdictions.
 - Determine that the questions of law posed by the South Central Jurisdictional Conference questioning the legality of Bishop Oliveto's election are moot and hypothetical. The South Central Jurisdiction covers eight states, Arkansas, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas.
 - Decide in favor of the South Central Jurisdiction's petition and nullify Bishop Oliveto's election and her assignment as the bishop to the Mountain Sky Episcopal Area.
 - While not nullifying the election it instead requires the Western Jurisdiction to conduct some sort of review. That could include requiring the Western Jurisdiction to examine Bishop Oliveto's ministerial credentials, to decide if she is eligible for election. It may or may not retain jurisdiction to oversee this process.
 - Decide to do nothing, and defer action until the completion of the Way Forward process being undertaken by the Council of Bishops.

5. **What is the Way Forward process?** The 32-member Commission on a Way Forward emerged from the impasse over The United Methodist Church's positions of human sexuality that dominated much of the 2016 United Methodist General Conference in Portland Ore. Proposed by the Council of Bishops, the commission is examining every paragraph in the Book of Discipline related to human sexuality. It is working to develop options for moving the church forward in ways that balance cultural contexts and theological understandings while retaining its unity as a denomination. Its results are expected to be presented to a specially called session of the General Conference in 2019.
6. **What happens if Bishop Oliveto's election is nullified? Does that mean she will no longer be the bishop of the Mountain Sky Area and the Rocky Mountain and Yellowstone Conferences?** It is premature to speculate what could happen. There are many options that could come out of the Judicial Council's decision. The Western Jurisdiction has offered a strong case to support Bishop Oliveto's election and her service as the bishop of the Mountain Sky Area.
7. **How will churches in the Western Jurisdiction learn of the outcome of the Judicial Council's deliberations?** First, each annual conference will report on the April 24 Judicial Council hearing. Several bishops from the Jurisdiction will be present. News about the hearing will be posted on each Western Jurisdiction conference's social media sites, and the Western Jurisdiction web site and social media sites. As soon as the Judicial Council releases its decision, the jurisdiction's conferences will post the news on their social media sites, and the Western Jurisdiction will post the result on its web site and social media sites. Information will also be posted for congregations to use across the jurisdiction.