

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Nine New England Congregations Begin Process of Discernment Regarding Disaffiliation from The United Methodist Church

Nine United Methodist congregations from the New England Conference have notified Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar of their intention to begin an eight-month process of discernment regarding disaffiliation from The United Methodist Church, indicating that their understanding of human sexuality and God's inclusive love is in direct and potentially irreconcilable conflict with the policies and practices of The United Methodist Church.

Leaders from these nine congregations — a team comprised of clergy and laity alike — have been meeting almost weekly since April 2019, initially to process their collective dismay over the oppressive and punitive actions of the Special 2019 Session of General Conference, and then to collaborate in developing an outline and curriculum for a discernment process that fulfills the conditions of New England Annual Conference Resolution 19-211, which requires eight months of discernment, to include a series of listening sessions and exploration of the impact of such a decision.

At the conclusion of this period of discernment, each of these nine congregations may or may not take formal action to separate from The United Methodist Church according to the terms of ¶ 2553 of *The United Methodist Book of Discipline*, entitled "Disaffiliation of a Local Church over Issues Related to Human Sexuality."

Rev. Will Green, a commissioned Provisional Elder in the New England Conference currently serving Brackett Memorial United Methodist Church in Peaks Island, Maine, described the intentions of these nine congregations: "We are considering leaving The United Methodist Church because of the anti-LGBTQ policies and teachings of the denomination. We are discerning whether we are called by God to separate from the denomination as a way of pursuing justice in solidarity with people who are explicitly discriminated against by The United Methodist Church. This is not about saving money or acting on old grudges. In the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we are primarily centered in liberation and justice." Rev. Green has, for almost two decades, advocated for legislative changes to reverse discriminatory, anti-LGBTQ policies in The United Methodist Church.

"Our United Methodist denomination was founded in 1968," recalled Pastor Linda Brewster, who serves Tuttle Road United Methodist Church in Cumberland, Maine, "and four years later, the harmful, exclusive, anti-LGBTQ language was embedded in our Book of Discipline. For almost 50 years we've been debating the sacred worth of our LGBTQ siblings, and for almost 50 years we've failed to affirm their full humanity, sacred worth, giftedness, and calling. If our denomination can't find a way to repent and open its doors fully to all of God's children, we will find another way to embody love and justice outside The United Methodist Church." Pastor Brewster serves the church in a bivocational capacity; in addition to her local church ministry, she owns and operates her own private medical practice as a Nurse Practitioner.

The nine congregations beginning this discernment process chose to notify Bishop Devadhar on September 26 because of its historical significance for New England Methodists, as the 232nd anniversary of the date when Rev. Jesse Lee, an early Methodist circuit rider evangelist, formed the first Methodist Class in New England on September 26, 1787.

Rev. Sara Ewing-Merrill, who serves HopeGateWay, a United Methodist congregation in Portland, Maine, explained: “We are inspired by the witness and legacy of Rev. Jesse Lee, who devoted his life to carrying the Gospel of Love to people all around New England. He faced tremendous obstacles. At times he risked his life for this cause, and often his message was not well received because it challenged the prevailing perspectives and religious sensibilities of his day. But he was so persuaded by the truth of God’s transformative, all-consuming love, and he was so committed to the path of personal holiness and social holiness, that he persevered. And so will we.”

The group seeks to embody the values and commitments articulated in a proclamation entitled “Loved and Liberated,” released in May 2019 by a group called UM-Forward. That proclamation includes this statement: “We envision a vibrant church living the Gospel and uncompromising on Jesus’ love ethic of full inclusion and affirmation. We proclaim the full liberation of Persons of Color + Queer + Trans (PoC+Q+T) People in The United Methodist Church. We pursue an intersectional and anti-colonial framework to social justice and the dismantling of white supremacy, cisgender-heteronormativity, and patriarchy. We declare that there can be no compromising of full inclusion in any way.”

Gloria Brown, a layperson from Chebeague Island United Methodist Church in Maine who has been actively involved in this collaborative process, celebrated the vision of the UM-Forward proclamation: “These words speak my truth and compel me to help shape this discernment process: ‘We yearn to be a grace-full church that embodies love and relentlessly and unapologetically pursues social justice and equity... a way of collective flourishing, intersectional justice, transformative healing, and liberating love.’ This is the church God calls us to be. This is the church I feel called to help create.”

The nine congregations presently embarking on this journey of discernment include:

- Ballard Vale United Church, Andover, Massachusetts — Rev. Geisa Matos
- Brackett Memorial UMC, Peaks Island, Maine — Rev. Will Green
- Calvary UMC, Arlington, Massachusetts — Rev. Dr. Cynthia Good
- Chebeague Island UMC, Chebeague Island, Maine — Pastor Melissa Yosua-Davis
- Epiphany UMC, South Portland, Maine — Rev. Dr. Andrea Harvey
- HopeGateWay, Portland, Maine — Rev. Sara Ewing-Merrill
- Tuttle Road UMC, Cumberland, Maine — Pastor Linda Brewster
- Versailles UMC, Versailles, Connecticut — Pastor Wanda Greaves
- West Scarborough UMC, West Scarborough, Maine — Rev. Dodie Sheffield

In communicating their intentions to Bishop Devadhar, these nine congregations have formally commenced their eight-month process of discernment pursuant to New England Annual Conference Resolution 19-211. Other congregations may choose to join this collaborative process or begin their own at a later date.

No decisions will be made before the 2020 Session of General Conference, slated for May 5-15, 2020 in Minneapolis. Any decision to disaffiliate would require a two-thirds vote of a Charge Conference and the action of the New England Annual Conference.

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