



April 18, 2017

**To the people called Methodists within the Greater Northwest Area:**

Grace and Peace to you in the name of our Risen Savior, Jesus.

I write to keep you informed of an important matter involving the Western Jurisdiction of The United Methodist Church. It is important to keep you apprised of developments in the questions raised over Bishop Karen Oliveto's election last July.

Just after she was elected by the Western Jurisdiction Conference, the South Central Jurisdiction asked our denomination's top court, the Judicial Council, to rule on the validity of her election. The Judicial Council will hear arguments in the matter when it meets in Newark, N.J. on April 25, with a ruling expected within days. This process is outlined in our Book of Discipline.

The bishops of the Western Jurisdiction believe that Bishop Oliveto's election and assignment to the Mountain Sky Area is valid. It is our prayer that the Judicial Council will confirm this position. Nonetheless, we know there are several potential outcomes. We know the ruling will have implications for the entire denomination, but Bishop Oliveto and the Mountain Sky Area will be affected most.

Accompanying this letter is an information sheet prepared by the Western Jurisdiction. We ask pastors and church leaders to make this letter and the accompanying material available to congregations as soon as possible. After the ruling, we will provide more information and guidance for our churches and leaders.

No matter what the decision is, we know some among us will not agree. Some will feel hurt. Some will feel distanced from the church. That is why we must be in prayer for one another and for our church. We ask you to pray for Bishop Oliveto, the Cabinet and conference leaders of the Mountain Sky Area, members of the Judicial Council, and all who will participate in the hearing on April 25.

We do not believe agreement, even on major issues like this, has ever been a requirement for loving each other and remaining one family in Christ Jesus who, in the week of his death and resurrection, prayed that we may be one. (John 17:21)

Although the Council's decision could have significant implications on our life together, we have faith that the Resurrection of Jesus is what most determines our future. The United Methodist Church, and its predecessors, have faced many challenges and disagreements in the past and has lived to witness to the grace of God in Jesus Christ through our distinctive Wesleyan voice we offer the world. We know God will see us through this time as well.

Yours in Christ,



Bishop Elaine JW Stanovsky

## Answering Your Questions 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 the following: "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 17<sup>th</sup> 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 United States, 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 on 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 25 Judicial Council hearing. Several bishops from the Jurisdiction will be present including Bishop Elaine Stanovsky. 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.