Resolution Supporting Harm Reduction for LGBTQ Teens

WHEREAS, according to the Social Principles of the United Methodist Church, “We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons,”(¶161 F); and

WHEREAS, the United Methodist Church has affirmed its commitment to be in ministry to persons of all sexual orientations, and points out that “an individual confronting his or her own minority sexual orientation and/or that of a close family member, friend, or associate often experiences isolation, confusion, and fear when he or she needs information, guidance, and support, and we recognize that teens dealing with questions about sexual orientation are at a greater risk for suicide” (#2041, 2012 Book of Resolutions); and

WHEREAS, studies have shown that LGBT teens who experienced high levels of rejection at home were more than eight times as likely as their peers to have attempted suicide, six times more likely to report high levels of depression, three times more likely to use illegal drugs, and three time more likely to be at high risk for HIV and sexually transmitted diseases; and

WHEREAS, the United Methodist Church has also affirmed its opposition to homophobia and heterosexism, and its opposition to “all forms of violence or discrimination based on gender, gender identity, sexual practice, or sexual orientation” (#2042, 2012 Book of Resolutions); and

WHEREAS, even though our church has diverse opinions on issues of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, our challenge is to figure out how to share the Good News and be in ministry together in spite of our differences, we should share a commitment to do no harm, to do good by strengthening families, and to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the United Methodist churches of the Alabama-West Florida Conference will educate families about how to respond with love to their youth who share that their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression may not conform to their family’s expectations; this response includes affirming the value and sacred worth of their youth, maintaining safe spaces and not severing ties with their youth, and demonstrating respect for their youth. It is not necessary for parents to agree with their children in order to demonstrate God’s love.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that where possible, United Methodist churches of the Alabama-West Florida Conference will work with local schools to encourage best practices for creating safe spaces, reducing bullying, and showing gracious love to youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, or who question their sexual orientation or gender identity.

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(this resolution is modeled after the one of the same name that passed last year at the North Alabama Annual Conference, with permission from the author)
RATIONALE

for proposed Resolution Supporting Harm Reduction for LGBTQ Teens:

Although there are diverse opinions about theology and polity in our church, especially around issues of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, we are committed to reducing homelessness and to reducing risk and harm to youth.

Dr. Caitlin Ryan has studied the effect of family acceptance and rejection on mental health outcomes for youth and young adults. Some of her most relevant work has been done with conservative Mormon (Church of Latter Day Saints) families. Ryan consistently points out that it is not necessary for most families to change their faith commitments or religious practices to love their children. Parents learn that they do not have to agree with their children to defend their children’s rights, advocate for them against bullying, and support them in loving ways. Her research has helped make the Mormon Church more welcoming to those with whom they disagree.¹

In her research, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender teens who experienced high levels of rejection at home were more than eight times likely to have attempted suicide, six times likely to report high levels of depression, three times more likely to use illegal drugs, and three times more likely to be at high risk for HIV and sexually transmitted disease.² These risk factors persist well into adulthood. In addition, as many as 40 percent of homeless youth identify as

lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Many of these youth are on the streets because their families shut them out of their homes.

Dr. Ryan points out that even families who reject their children most strongly, cutting them off from their friends, shutting them out of their homes, or subjecting them to conversion therapy, do so because they are motivated by love and fear; they do not want their children to be at risk. Yet these very rejecting behaviors lead to the most harmful outcomes.

Recent teen suicides highlight the importance of family support and the dangers of “conversion therapy.” Since families often resort to these tactics because of their religious beliefs, churches have a special obligation to train families in best practices for reducing such harm.

Because of our diverse opinions on issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, the United Methodist Church is uniquely positioned to help families, even those with strong religious convictions against homosexuality, to adopt less rejecting behaviours toward their children who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

This resolution builds on General Conference resolutions #2041 and #2043 by specifically naming family education and partnering with schools as a key component of reducing harm to LGBT youth.

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