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The Call

August 26, 2005

HOLSTON CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Volume 22, Number 19

Episcopal Letter:

Bishop responds to concerns about Lake Junaluska event

I pray for grace and peace to be upon the Holston Conference and send to you the blessings of God our Creator, Jesus our Savior, and the Holy Spirit, our Comfort and Guide.



I WRITE THIS LETTER TO THE PEOPLE of the Holston Conference whom I have the joy and privilege of serving as Chief Shepherd. In recent days I have received letters, emails, and telephone calls from clergy and mostly laypersons expressing their displeasure, angst, and in some cases anger about the "Hearts on Fire" conference sponsored by the Reconciling Ministries Network, scheduled to meet at Lake Junaluska on Labor Day weekend. It is difficult to respond in a letter to those who are angry and hurt in such a way that they will hear not only my words but experience my heart. So I trust that the Holy Spirit will help you to overcome this separation when you read these words.

I am in full support of our church's position as stated in section 161G of the 2004 *Book of Discipline*. I quote only one paragraph of that section, and I urge all the people of Holston to read the full paragraph:

"Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as

the spiritual and emotional care of the fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice to be incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God's grace is available to all, and we will seek to live


together in Christian community. 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."

■ For the United Methodist News Service report on the Lake Junaluska controversy, see page 6.

As you can clearly see, the church's position is strong on what we believe to be a practice that is *incompatible with Christian teaching*, but it is equally strong in calling us to extend Christ's love to all persons. It is my firm belief that when we stand on principles, we must also assume a posture that communicates the redemptive message of Christ. How we object is just as important as our objections. Therefore, I urge all Holston United Methodists to respond to this gathering with nothing less than a Christ-like Spirit. Your Christ-like response only indicates to others your genuine commitment to always reflect Christ, even when you disagree. In

all circumstances we attempt to persuade others that Christianity is right and good for all. Jesus never got angry about others attacking him or what he taught, but he was angry about those who took advantage of the poor, powerless, and weak.

In my heart I believe that this turmoil and unrest will distract us from the vision to which I believe God is calling us, a fresh vision of making disciples, and I will not let this or any other events distract me from that mission. Those who would exploit this matter need to know that we in the Holston Annual Conference will stay focused on making disciples even when their actions and words seek to distract us. We are determined to be faithful to our Lord's call to make disciples. And so I end on the note of the hymn writer, *"Rise up ye saints of God! Have done with lesser things. Give heart and mind and soul and strength to serve the King of kings."* ■

Yours in Christ,


James E. Swanson, Sr.
Resident Bishop, Holston Episcopal Area
August 12, 2005