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BE HAPPY IN HOPE
(ROMANS 12:12)

Grace and peace to you, Children of a Loving God,

I write to touch base after doing some listening to how news of The United Methodist General Conference is being received in Northern Illinois. To do that, I need to start with a story.

I was sitting in the barbershop, waiting for my turn to get a haircut (a task still necessary in my life that may surprise many of you). This was my General Conference haircut. While I waited, I heard someone who was reading something say, "So what is Palm Sunday and Easter, anyway?"

The question came to me from the side, someone asking but almost daring anyone to answer. I launched into a synopsis of dozens of Palm Sunday sermons in my head. I explained Easter in 50 words or less. On my way home I unpacked the meaning of the question: our context is full of people who live by the scripts of success or fear-mongering, or just being ungrounded in the joy we have. I cannot imagine my life without the script of gospel hope.

The scripts are flipping in The United Methodist Church. We have been living with scripts for battle and not scripts for Jubilee, scripts for harm and not scripts for grace. Romans 12:12, in the Common English Bible, says it this way: "Be happy in your hope." We are made to live from hope.

United Methodists have an expansive view of grace. Grace is God's unmerited, unqualified love and regard for our good. John Wesley insisted that grace was free for all and needed by all. We are here to grow in grace. Ministry is living by grace in our daily lives, and ministry is from anyone to anyone. Our hope is in God's freedom and in God's capacity to offer grace that makes new. Some decisions at the General Conference helped us reflect what we say we believe.

The prohibitive language related to weddings for our siblings who identify as LGBTQ+ was removed from our Book of Discipline. Clergy who identify as LGBTQ+ need not live in fear of being brought up on charges. Mandatory penalty language was removed. Until 1972 our predecessor bodies that make up the UMC did not have any such language in the Book of Discipline. In some ways we are coming home to what was.

The definition of marriage was expanded to include the types of family that people are choosing today. We recognize that marriage is between a man and a woman or between two adults of consenting age.

Let's be clear:

- No one needs to be afraid of losing their clergy credentials for performing same-gender weddings.
- Clergy can choose to perform same-gender weddings or choose not to.
- Local church boards of trustees can decide what kinds of weddings they wish to host in their buildings.

- Clergy will be appointed in the ways we have always appointed them, based on stated needs for the mission and gifts to match those needs. Appointments will not be made to do harm to our ministry.

I understand that there will be those who grieve these decisions, including some siblings in our Hispanic/Latinx community, our Korean church community, and persons who are more traditional theologically. They have my support for their ministry. You may have heard some will be punished for this or that—but this is misinformation. My role is to equip the ministry of the whole conference, and that will continue. I understand that local pastors may also feel disappointed that some of their sought-after legislation did not come to the floor of General Conference. Here in the Northern Illinois Conference, my aim is to maintain regard and support for all persons from every group so that we can make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Our diversity allows us to be in ministry with a wider public who may not know our Easter hope. I invite you to read the [online news updates](#) for more detail about the most recent General Conference.

The word that has stayed with me most since the General Conference is "healing." I believe the gospel is healing, and I believe the UMC needs healing from scripts of harm that have turned our focus inward. I believe it is a time to heal—many persons in our church have hidden who they are. Many are afraid the church is no longer for them. The General Conference did not fix racism or White Christian Nationalism. We have more work before us.

Easter hope was not received right away. It took some time with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. It took Thomas touching the scars in the risen Lord to believe. It took fish on the shore and familiar voice to turn Peter. I will pray for our eyes to apprehend and receive the Easter love always with us. May it be so.

Know that I am praying for you.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "James W. Schuman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.