

Love Prevails at General Conference 2012

In June 2011, The Wisconsin Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church tried Rev. Amy DeLong for being what the church calls a “self-avowed practicing homosexual” and for doing a Holy Union for two loving women. In preparation for the trial, Rev. Amy called together a support team and trial team under the banner, *Love On Trial*. After a trial that advanced the cause of LGBTQI clergy and brought forth a remarkable restorative justice decision, there was a discernment retreat to determine what was next.

Some within the support team decided to move on to other ministries. Some decided to continue to walk with Amy through her sentence and to be present at the Wisconsin Annual Conference when she presents her proposal to deal with adversarial relationships among the clergy. Those continuing on shifted their focus by renaming themselves — *Love Prevails*.

On March 7, 2012, with General Conference coming at the end of April, Amy invited additional people from around the country to think together on how to make a strong and visible impact at General Conference. This planning arose because The Love Your Neighbor Coalition that was going to advocate for repeal of discriminatory legislation against LGBTQI people had not announced any particular strategies or tactics to meet this goal. While there are good reasons for keeping some information relatively quiet, it also keeps allies uncertain. At any rate, without information *Love Prevails - General Conference* began weekly conference calls.

Within a couple of weeks, 7 people committed to continue on to General Conference as *Love Prevails* — Amy DeLong, Jim Dietrich and Steven Webster, Sue Laurie, Julie Todd, and Brenda Smith White and Wesley White.

An early image that held all the way through our planning was the sad one of a church shackled by discrimination. In closing itself to LGBTQI Christians, the integrity of the church is compromised and weakened.

A visual prayer:



In less than a month, *Love Prevails* organized 5 actions:

- Distribute broken chain links to delegates, encouraging them to vote to break the chains of discrimination that hold the church captive.
- Construct a church model that would be symbolically “chained”. Jim Dietrich deserves credit for its implementation.
- Develop and distribute a series of posters that speak to current harm being done and the possibility of a new way of living together. Amy designed the posters.
- Develop and distribute a flyer entitled, “When Holy Conferencing is Neither”.
- Engage in bold, direct action to end discrimination in The United Methodist Church.

Monday, April 23, 2012 — *Love Prevails* begins before General Conference officially begins by attending the dedication of the official prayer rooms. Our experience is that prayer has been a force for harm against LGBTQI people. We want to at least be present wearing rainbow stoles and carrying a sign based on the prayer usually said by the clergy at the beginning of communion.

*It is right, and a good and joyful thing
that GLBTIQ UMs
always & everywhere give thanks to G-D
by praying - "The Great Thanksgiving"*

This beginning is a very small whisper, probably unnoticed.

On **Tuesday, April 24**, the first day of General Conference, we roll out the chained church.

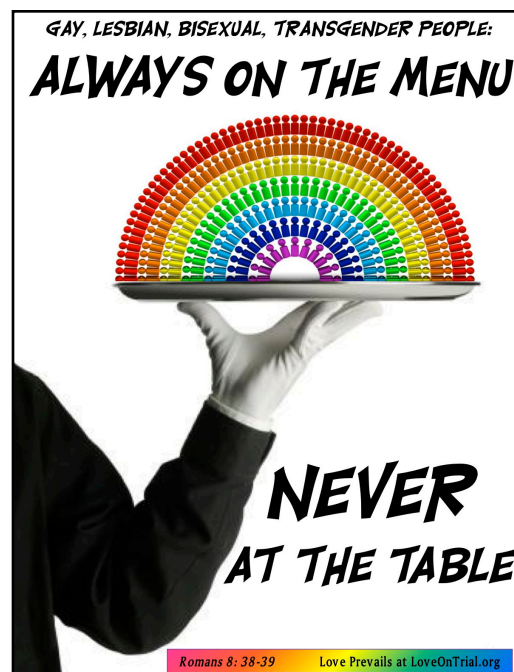


This is quite the photo-op and attracts a fair amount of attention.

We hand out the first poster and put it on the church.



Wednesday, April 25, we initially repeat Tuesday's process, but are told by building officials that we can't have the church stationary on the Convention Center property. Being past experts at picketing, we simply move the church around on its wheels. The parading of the chained church probably brings it more attention than staying in one place. The next poster is handed out.



This is also the day in which there are two sessions of “Holy Conferencing”. We know from their description and time allotted that these sessions are not going to be helpful and will probably cause greater harm. The following two-sided, half-sheet flyer is distributed:

When Holy Conferencing Is Neither

What to Bring to the Conversation:

- ✓ **Your Awareness!** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people are largely absent from the “dialogue” and their stories will not be told or heard. This will be a conversation *about*, not *with* them.
- ✓ **The Truth!** “Homosexuality is not an illness. It does not require treatment and it is not changeable.” (The American Psychological Association)
- ✓ **Your Voice!** Speak up. Nothing is more powerful than sharing your story about the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people you know and love or about how you became open and inclusive.
- ✓ **Your Focus!** Stay on message. This is not about who we like or don’t like; it is about the Gospel of Jesus Christ which implores us to draw the circle ever wider.

Policies that exclude and silence are unworthy of what it means to be church.

“Conversation about Human Sexuality” should not be about the acceptability of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people. It should be about the unacceptability of discrimination.

Our conversation will be fruitful only if it challenges us to see those who are rejected and marginalized, opens our hearts to their pain, and inspires us to work for full inclusion.

Romans 8: 38-39

Love Prevails at LoveOnTrial.org

*“You want to know how big God’s love is?
The answer: It’s very big. It’s bigger than you’re comfortable with.”*

From Anne Lamott’s, Grace (Eventually)

SOME HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

OPPRESSION

The use of power and authority to disempower, marginalize, silence, and subordinate others

HETEROSEXISM

The system of advantages bestowed on heterosexuals granting them superior status and rights in a culture and its institutions only because of their sexual orientation

HOMOPHOBIA

The irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against same-gender love and gay and lesbian persons

OR

The fear that someone will think *you* are gay

GENDER IDENTITY

The inner sense of being male or female – which is sometimes in conflict with one’s biological gender

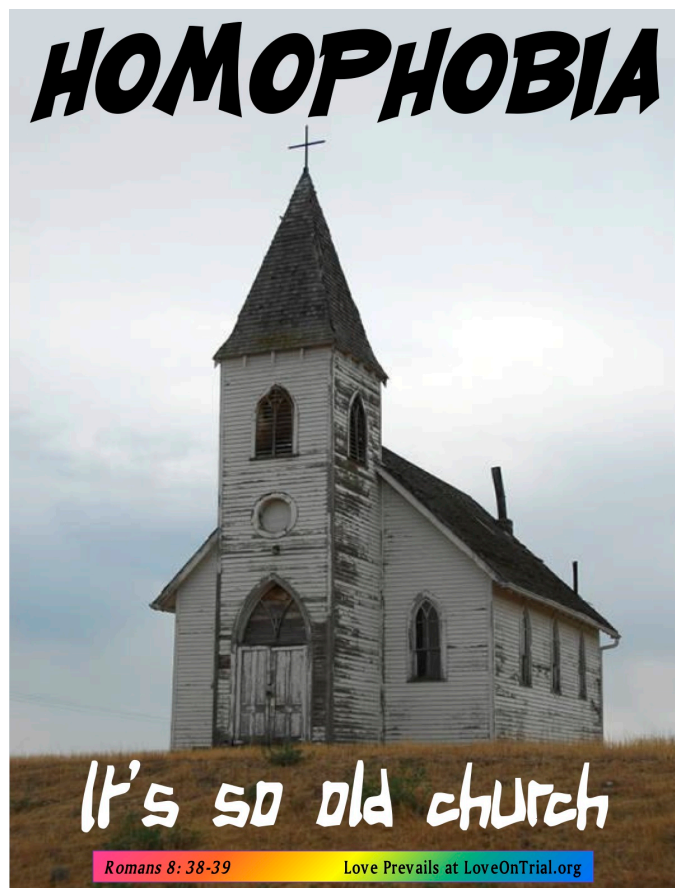
SEXUAL ORIENTATION

The continuum of enduring emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to another person, ranging from exclusively homosexual to exclusively heterosexual

We have enough handouts for half the delegates. There is no telling what effect this small action has, but we do what we can with a handful of people and a few more that volunteer to help. Our numbers grow slightly as people identify with our attempt to make public our opposition to current discriminatory legislation. When wrong is being done and painful stories have been told and faithful attempts to dialogue and build relationships have failed to effect change, there comes a time to confront wrong-doers.

The official Laity Address is given by three people; one is a lesbian who offered the refrain, "If it's to be, it's up to me." This is how *Love Prevails* talks about a perceived unwillingness of allied groups to move from advocating legislative action to applying moral suasion.

Thursday, April 26, finds our poster of the day to be all too pertinent:



Legislative Committees are the primary action of the day. Petitions about human sexuality are directly present in several committees and a background in the rest. Reports abound about delegates using both biblical proof-texting and outright lies about the lives of gay and lesbian Christians. Hurtful comments seem to never be more than a breath away.

A delegate requests Amy to speak to the Faith and Order subcommittee on ordination. After 90 minutes of "debate" the request is never put to a vote. A complaint by Sue Laurie is forwarded to the Rules and Ethics Committee.

Anti-gay conversations, continuing from the "Holy Conferencing" time on Wednesday, verify the need for direct action to happen sooner rather than later.

This evening Mark Miller (who is a delegate, a leader of music at General Conference, and a gay man) stands with other gay and lesbian delegates for a "moment of personal privilege" to express the hurt that was done during holy conferencing and legislative sessions. The presiding bishop welcomes the moment of personal privilege until it becomes clear that Mark is going to be honest about harm done. At that point the bishop claims that Mark has been recognized for a "point of order" and his speech is out of order and Mark and the others are to return to their seats. This piles harm upon harm.



After the session there is a silent witness as delegates leave the hall. Delegates pass between

rainbow-stoled witnesses who pray for them. Some ignore as best they could; some give an appreciative nod or some other form of blessing.



Friday, April 27, contains more Legislative Committee work.

A rally against private prisons ready to physically chain more people is held.

An Act of Repentance toward Healing Relationships with Indigenous People concludes the day.

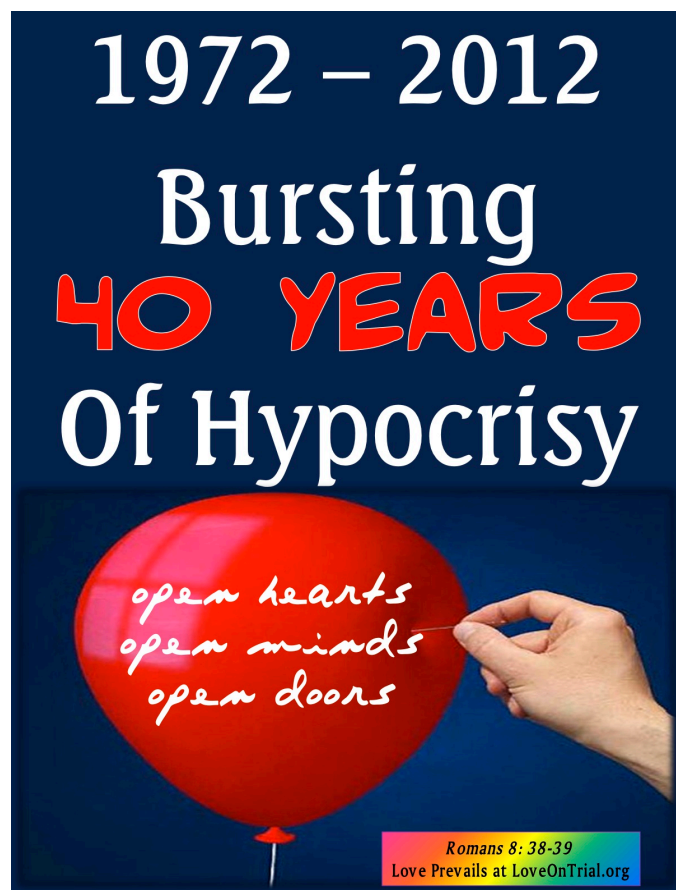


Dr. George "Tink" Tinker, member of the Osage Nation, is clear as he speaks of 500 years of

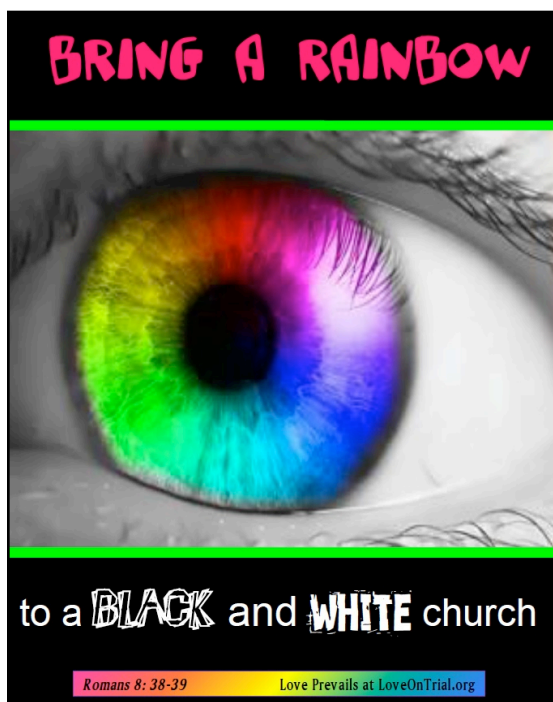
Christian conquest: "It's way too early to talk about reconciliation. It's like asking an abused spouse to live with the abuser without any change. . . . Apologies don't do anything. . . . Repentance is not something done once. It is a way of life. . . . We have to give up some of the things Americans hold dear and make sure all have genuinely equal access to the riches of the world."

The COSROW report for the day continues this reflection and its affect on us: "Though we are at the intersection of remembrance and repentance, some of us are hesitant to proceed. The inheritance we have from our colonial past — perpetuation of Manifest Destiny, U.S. entitlement, and presumptions of privilege — continues to affect committee work in General Conference."

The whole day reflects the need to repent our current mantra of openness. Our poster points at this reality.



Saturday, April 28, is full with Legislative Committee work. *Love Prevails* sees the Conference's task to ...



Some committees find a way to work well together, while all too many become harsher and harsher in their labeling of people. Our LGBTQI friends are called drug addicts and dealers, practitioners of bestiality, alcoholics, pedophiles, genetically deviant, and more. For a community called to "love one another", many lessons have yet to be learned.

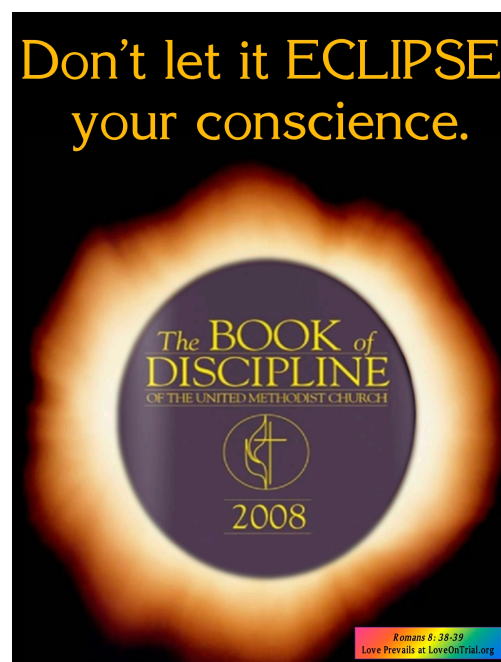
Sunday, April 29, has many worship services, including Rev. Amy DeLong preaching at Lakewood United Methodist Church in St. Petersburg, one of two Reconciling Churches in the Florida Conference. An audio of her sermon can be found at www.loveontrial.org/media/lakewood_sermon.mp3 and of her rally statement at www.loveontrial.org/media/coalition_rally.mp3.

The Love Your Neighbor Coalition has a worship service at noon with Rev. Dr. James Cone preaching on "The Cross and the Lynching Tree". Though the same scripture base is used by those who lynch and those who persevere in the face

of lynchings, redemptive power is eventually in the hands and hearts of those who persevere in the face of discrimination and prejudice. God's grace is strong, pervasive, and expanding. Cone clearly named the parallel between discrimination against blacks and the ongoing discrimination against the LGBTQI community.

Our chained church is blown apart by the wind over the weekend. We choose to see this as a promise of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit will bust up a church that is shackled by discrimination.

Monday, April 30, begins the plenary voting process on the work of the legislative committees. What is at stake is whether or not our moral conscience will stand firm or if we will take a simple majority vote approach to faith. And so our poster to start the week:



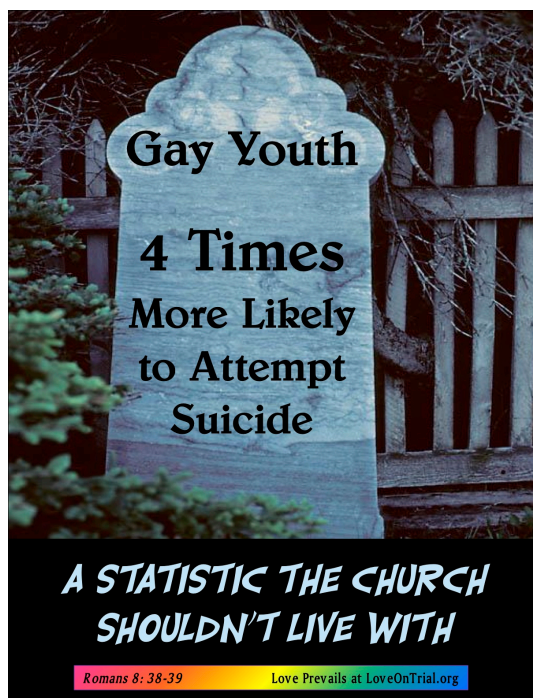
As one set of chains is symbolically broken apart by the wind another set of chains is being proposed as a new structure for the church that would dramatically shift our way of doing ministry to a business model, but with conflicting authorities. A compromise structure, picking from here and there among three other failed proposals, will be before the body starting tomorrow.

Love Prevails waits a day to see if there will be any clear action that will help move our *Book of Discipline* toward the way of Wesleyan grace again. The die-in and flash-mob dance that happen are important as they involve bodies, but they are not sufficient unless they are building toward an intervention against harm.

Tuesday, May 1, — *Love Prevails* begins to be present in the voting space as we hover like a cloud of witnesses and march around the plenary. Our witness grows as people from the stands come out to join our presence with their bodies.



A part of our energy comes from this reality:



There are conversations between *Love Prevails* and the Love Your Neighbor Coalition trying to clarify who is doing what and when. Love Your Neighbor asks us to label our banners and posters to distinctly identify our actions as *Love Prevails* initiatives, so we do (as evident on the banner in the left column). Hopefully we are catalysts for each other with our various resources and energies.

During plenary, an interesting vote is taken on the statement "We stand united in declaring our faith that God's grace is available to all—that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." Some delegates argue against the added sentence saying that belief and action *can* separate us from the love of God in Jesus. Others suggest that there is a difference between God's love for all and human response to that love. It turns out that our historic Arminian understanding of grace holds, but only by 56% to 44% (so much for "stand united").

After lunch, *Love Prevails* has another silent witness around the bar, addressing the vote on grace ("We are the 56%" and "I am Gay by God's Grace" were popular sentiments). Ironically, we enter the plenary hall while a presentation is being given about racism in The United Methodist Church and an announcement of healing, of full communion between our denomination and the historically black denominations.

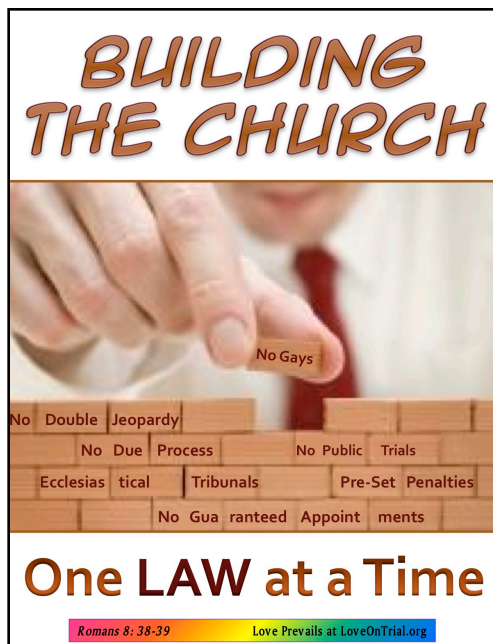


Wednesday, May 2, is relatively quiet. One Love Your Neighbor action, a breaking of the bar, ups the ante one more notch and *Love Prevails* is glad to see more action and joins in.



Of significance is the passage of a compromise restructuring called Plan UMC. Immediately after the compromise passes, Scott Campbell, Amy's counsel during the trial, requests a declaratory decision from the Judicial Council about its constitutionality. (This will be significant later.)

Thursday, May 3, becomes a turning point. This is the time for legislation and debate about human sexuality. Our poster identifies the moment of action.



Love Prevails joins a Love Your Neighbor action to surround the bar of the Conference with rainbow-stoled people, praying that the delegates and their decisions might begin to roll back the current discriminatory legislation. Some delegates go to the inside edge of the bar with their voting pads in hand to stand in solidarity with those outside the bar.



The first vote is the often proposed softening of language to indicate that we are not all of one mind. This will not change any of the current discriminatory legislation. A 39% - 61% vote defeats this expression of reality. Knowing that all coming votes would probably follow this same voting pattern, those outside the bar come into the bar and gather around the communion table, singing and offering communion.

During the communion service intervention, the presiding bishop decides to recess the conference an hour early and threatens to close the rest of the proceedings to visitors.



And for *Love Prevails* a great mystery begins.

At the end of communion, which seems to be all that is planned, a benediction is given to “Go in peace.” Amy places her hands on the communion table and says, “We’re not leaving, we’re staying” and the liturgist adds to the benediction, “Or stay in peace”.

While singing continues around the table, a person from the press comes and asks for Amy.

Why Amy is asked for, instead of a Love Your Neighbor Coalition leader, is not known. At any rate, they want Amy to know that the bishops on the platform are talking about beginning a procedure to arrest the protesters on the floor. Amy coaches the messenger to go back to the bishops with this question, “Is that the best pastoral response you have for the harm that has been done?”

Within a short while, Amy finds herself surrounded by bishops attempting to have her end the demonstration.



Amy keeps asking these questions to every proposal the bishops made: “How will doing that help gay people?” and “How does doing that address the systemic injustice against LGBTQI people?” Julie Todd encourages the bishops to return to the other bishops and encourage them to join the protest. Eventually Amy and Julie, in conversation with others in both the *Love Prevails* and Love Your Neighbor Coalition, prevail with three conditions:

- The president of the Council of Bishops, Rosemarie Wenner, will begin the next session with an acknowledgement that harm has been done to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people (using those words and not broadening it to claim that “all are hurting”). Additionally, she will offer a clear statement about what had transpired since the recess and next steps.
- No more legislation about human sexuality will come this afternoon and representatives of Love Prevails, Love Your Neighbor, and Renewal and Reform (Good News, etc.) groups will meet with the Committee on the Agenda to negotiate placement of these petitions.
- Prayer at the beginning of the next session will be given by an out, gay, clergy, appointed to a local congregation, not by a bishop, and given from the podium.

If these conditions are not met, the protesters promise to break the bar again and the bishops will have to initiate arrests. The bishops are on notice that they cannot continue to betray LGBTQI United Methodists by talking a good game but giving them up when push comes to shove.

After three hours of singing and negotiations, the next session carries out the first and third agreements and those around the communion table leave the bar of the conference.

Later, the Agenda Committee puts all human sexuality petitions and debate at the end of General Conference, effectively stopping them. A petition to remove the UMC from the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC) is also moved down the agenda.

At the top of the next page is a picture of the negotiations when Bishop Craig, in the power position, is saying to Amy, “It is time to stop; you are now hurting your cause.” *Love Prevails* sees the picture under another light.



We retitle this picture, “A Passing of the Mantle”. Those with eyes to see can see a commissioning of Amy and the LGBTQI community — investing them with authority to lead where the bishops have feared to go.

Again, how Amy and Julie, of *Love Prevails*, come to be at the center of this action continues as a great mystery to us. If anyone has a back story, please do pass it on to us.

Friday, May 4, Another significant action taking place alongside our work on discriminatory legislation — restructuring The United Methodist Church — comes back into play. The Judicial Council unanimously declares Plan UMC unconstitutional, with no part of it being salvageable. The result of this decision is to have General Conference spend the rest of its time and energy on slight modifications of our current structure. We rejoice to have the Commission on the Status and Role of Women and Commission on Religion and Race returned to their independent monitoring functions.

An attempt is made from the floor in the last few minutes of General Conference to change the agenda to consider withdrawal from RCRC. We are ready to again break the bar if it is debated. The body rejects taking action on it and the legislative work of General Conference ends.

Love Prevails completes its modest planned actions and is amazed at the opportunities given to us. We are thankful for the resources and planning of the Love Your Neighbor coalition and to have followed the Spirit’s lead as boldly as we were able.

We leave with a marginal gain.

- A statement is added to the preamble of our Social Principles, “our unity in Jesus Christ while acknowledging differences in applying our faith in different cultural contexts as we live out the gospel.”
- Harsher legislation against LGBTQI United Methodists is held at bay. The hole we still have to dig out from is at least no deeper.
- The “Renewal and Reform” group has an apology in their Friday paper. We presume they feel caught in causing harm in a way they had been able to previously avoid. Their statement is, “Sometimes our words and actions weighed heavier on “incompatible with Christian teaching” than on “persons of sacred worth.” That was never our intent. Despite that, we apologize.”

We see this as a formal apology without regret or sorrow. This is simply an announcement of a return to what they consider to be a balanced attack on human sexuality on the basis of a false division – love the sinner: hate the sin. Approaching real and undivided human beings this way, simply doesn’t work. Eventually the internal contradiction of this position will lead to their downfall. Unfortunately, many will be harmed in the meantime.

General Conference comes to an end. But the work of mercy and justice continue. We leave with much to do and a renewal of energy to continue revealing G*D’s love in our midst.

Thank you for your journey with *Love Prevails*. We are still evaluating whether we broke even or are a bit in the red. Donations for the work yet ahead can be made at LoveOnTrial.org.

Comments are welcome at info@LoveOnTrial.org

Photos are from United Methodist News Service and Posters are from LoveOnTrial.org.