

**A CALL TO DIALOGUE:  
A PASTORAL LETTER  
FROM  
UCC CONFERENCE MINISTERS**

**Equal Marital Rights #1**

This is an Equal Marital Rights for Same Gender Couples educational/advocacy resource of the United Church of Christ, Wider Church and Justice and Witness Ministries. United Church of Christ congregations have permission to reproduce this resource for use in the local church.



**For additional information contact:**

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# **A Call to Dialogue**

A Pastoral Letter

from the  
Conference Ministers of the United Church of Christ

June 4, 1997

The Church in every generation has been faced with issues of great complexity and moral difficulty that have caused the household of faith to reaffirm the things that bind us together as the Body of Christ. The Preamble of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ reminds us that while the Church “claims as its own the faith of the historic Church. . .,” it also has “the responsibility. . .in each generation to make this faith its own in the reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God.”

Former generations have had to deal with such social and cultural challenges as the institution of slavery, divorce and remarriage, war and peace, the ordination of women, civil rights, and a variety of other complex issues. Our readings of scripture have resulted in sometimes confusing and occasionally even conflicting interpretations. In each of these points of tension, some of which continue in our midst, we have had to struggle together as a people of God in ways that test our resolve to remain steadfast to both biblical truth and to our faith community. Each issue has tested the Church’s ability to speak boldly and to act passionately while remaining in covenant about that which we believe to be true and good. The Church has been most faithful when it has attempted prayerfully to discern the mind of Christ, engaging scripture and our traditions under the guidance of the Holy spirit.

One challenge facing the Church in our time is the issue of blessing relationships between same-sex couples and extending to them the same rights and privileges afforded to heterosexual couples. It has become a divisive issue in our culture and has split families, churches, and communities into opposing camps. Scriptures are quoted by all sides in this debate, disclosing both the essential truth of the biblical insights and the limited character of our understanding of God’s continuing revelation among us.

When we engage this difficult topic, we see human faces not abstract issues of sexual ethics, theology, or even matters of church order. First of all we see people; we see brothers and sisters, sons and daughters. We see the very neighbors Jesus has invited us to love. Our families often include gay men and lesbians who are baptized in Christ, members of our congregations, struggling and seeking the meaning and expression of covenantal commitment in Christian community.

We who serve among you as Conference Ministers, like the rest of the Church, and, indeed, like the rest of the society, are not of one mind on this issue. Some members of the household of faith believe that same-sex couples ought to enjoy the same rights as heterosexual couples; others disagree. There are those who argue persuasively that the Gospels have nothing to say about the issue of homosexuality and that therefore we should not judge. There are others who point out that Jesus holds the marriage covenant between a man and a woman as sacred. There is room here for open, honest, and loving debate in “honesty of thought and expression and purity of heart before

God.”

We believe that the Holy Spirit equips the Church to deal compassionately and faithfully with this contentious matter, not because Christians are especially gifted intellectually or rhetorically, but because of the great gift we have in Jesus Christ in whom all things are reconciled to God. We trust that the bond in Christ which knits us to each other is stronger than anything that can divide us.

We therefore invite you, our sisters and brothers in Christ, in the months ahead to engage in thoughtful, sincere, and respectful dialogue with one another. In congregations, Associations, and Conferences, let us explore our faith in relation to these issues: the meaning of Christian marriage, the blessing of unions among same-sex couples, the honoring of diverse expressions of loving and caring human relationships, being guided in all things by the love of Jesus. Above all, may these conversations be ventured in humility and prayer.

*Note: The names of Conference Ministers/Interims who have voted to affirm this document appear on the separate sheet.*

*--F. Russell Mitman, Secretary, Council of Conference Minister*

**Note:** The absence of a name does not indicate an expressed opposition to the letter. Only those who responded by June 4, 1997 are listed. There were no “no” votes among the responses.

Mary Susan Gast, California Northern Nevada  
Herman Haller, California Southern  
John Deckenback, Central Atlantic  
Hector Lopez, Central Pacific  
Davida Foy Crabtree, Connecticut  
Douglas Borko, Florida  
Robert Sandman, Illinois  
Ronald Eslinger, Illinois South  
Roger Perl, Indiana-Kentucky  
Susan Ingham, Iowa  
John Krueger, Kansas-Oklahoma  
Jack Richards, Maine  
Bennie Whiten, Massachusetts  
Kent Ulery, Michigan  
William Kaseman, Minnesota  
Gayle Engle, Missouri  
John Schaeffer, Montana-Northern Wyoming  
Daniel Vanderploeg, Nebraska

Carole Carlson, New Hampshire  
Benjamin Crosby, New Hampshire  
William Briggs, New York  
Jack Seville, Northern Plains  
Ralph Quellhorst, Ohio  
Lyle Weible, Penn Central  
Donald Overlock, Penn Northeast  
Russell Mitman, Pennsylvania Southeast  
Paul Westcoat, Penn West  
Daehler Hayes, Rhode Island  
William Dalke, Rocky Mountain  
Gene Miller, South Dakota  
Timothy Downs, Southeast  
Rollin Russell, Southern  
Cally Rogers-Witte, Southwest  
Samuel Fogal, Vermont  
Lynne Fitch, Washington-N. Idaho  
Frederick Trost, Wisconsin