

## **Altar for All** **a commitment to marry any prepared couple**

Following another disappointing United Methodist General Conference in 2012, Bishop Melvin Talbert called for “Biblical Obedience” – to operate as if the negative statements in the Book of Discipline (BOD) didn’t exist and to create a church where all people are welcomed. Altar for All began shortly thereafter. Through Altar for All, clergy, laity and congregations across the world signed statements committing themselves to fulfill their vow to ministry to all by marrying or blessing couples regardless of their gender. Clergy, considering their vow to uphold the Book of Discipline, made conscientious decisions for inclusive ministry rather than exclusion. These clergy believe that to do so is a faithful act of witness that claims Jesus’ command to “love God and neighbor.”

More than 3000 clergy, laity and congregations committed to Altar for All. Minnesota Altar for All congregations include Faith - St. Anthony Village, Hamline, Minnetonka, Peace - Shoreview, Richfield, Spirit of Hope and others.

### **History of Altar for All**

- 2011 – UMC clergy increasingly begin to publicly state that they would no longer discriminate in their ministries by denying full rights and opportunities to LGBTQ+ persons. This included officiating same-sex marriage or blessing ceremonies and holding them in churches. Rev. Bruce Robbins was a leader in what became known as “Altar for All”.
- 2012 – Bishop Melvin Talbert’s issues a call for Biblical Obedience following General Conference. "I accept a call for us to claim our identity as it relates to the Bible, to speak truth to power, and decide that laws that govern LGBTQ+ persons and allies in the life of the Church are immoral and unjust and are no longer deserving of our loyalty and support. Those of us who believe that way need to declare our beliefs and start doing the right thing."
- November 2012 – Minnesota defeats constitutional amendment that stated marriage was limited to a man and a woman.
- April 2013 – Minnesota legislature passes and governor signs marriage equality bill that would take effect in August.
- June 2015 – US Supreme Court finds that marriage cannot be limited to a man and a woman.
- May 2016 – UM General Conference tables all decisions relating to human sexuality, Bishops’ Commission forms that will study topic and bring recommendations to a special General Conference in February 2019.
- February 2019 – Special General Conference adopts the Traditional Plan which upheld and increased prohibitions relative to ministry to, with and by LGBTQ+ persons.
- June 2019 – Minnesota Annual Conference adopts a vision of a church “rooted in Jesus, grounded in Wesleyan theology, inclusive of all persons, and engaged in the work of justice and reconciliation.”

### **What’s the difference between Reconciling and Altar for All?**

- Many congregations didn’t consider same-sex blessings or marriages when the congregation chose to become Reconciling or didn’t explicitly include it in their reconciling statement.

- Currently there are many more Reconciling Congregations than Altar for All congregations. There may be Reconciling Congregations that host and clergy who perform same-sex marriages without signing an Altar for All statement.
- Welcoming, including, and celebrating LGBTQ+ attendees and members does not violate the BOD. Clergy performing same-gender weddings and allowing those weddings to be held on church property are both in violation.

### **Why consider Altar for All now that Reconciling Ministries Network is not focusing on it?**

- It is worthwhile for clergy and congregations to consider the question of same sex marriages before a couple requests marriage by the clergy person and/or in the church. This allows for a thoughtful, unrushed decision.
- Becoming an Altar for All clergy or congregation affirms commitment to biblical obedience regardless of what consequences may arise.

### **What are the risks of performing same sex weddings in a United Methodist church?**

- Per the BOD, this is a “chargeable offense” for clergy (BOD para. 2702.1). If a formal complaint is brought, there is a judicial process, conducted within the Annual Conference, that can result in a church trial and punishment (which can include defrocking).
- It is possible that laity could be charged for disobedience to the order & discipline of UMC, but this has never occurred. (BOD para. 2702.3).
- BOD prohibits ceremonies that “celebrate homosexual unions” by United Methodist ministers and in United Methodist churches. Charges have never been brought against a congregation. (BOD para 341.6)
- “Keeping Covenant with the Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church” has a more in-depth discussion of the Biblical background, a broader reading of the BOD and delineation of conflicting passages within BOD. (see Resources section below)

### **Possible process for considering Altar for All within a congregation**

1. Establish group to lead the process.
2. If clergy is not part of the leadership group, discuss with congregation’s clergy. Clergy and congregation decision are separate decisions. If the clergy is not supportive, are there clergy who attend the church (such as retired) who are supportive and open to being an Altar for All clergy or is the clergy open to outside clergy officiating weddings at the church?
3. Inform Administrative Council (or equivalent) of group’s interest and ideally gain their support. Determine how a decision will be made – leadership vote vs. congregational vote.
4. Develop education plan – this will vary from congregation to congregation. It is recommended to include communication to the congregation about the intent to consider Altar for All, educational sessions about the topic, at least one sermon about Altar for All (this generally reaches more individuals than the other items and provides public support for the plan) and study resources.
5. Draft Altar for All Marriage Equality statement – this should be done concurrent with developing the education plan so that it can be widely shared during the education process.
6. Implement education plan – include opportunities for people to freely express hopes and concerns relative to the Altar for All statement and decision.
7. Decision by Administrative Council or congregation. If adopted, celebrate the decision, and include on church website and social media.

### **Resources about marriage equality and Altar for All**

- Reconciling Ministries Network marriage equality resources  
<https://rmnetwork.org/resources-v2/>
- “Keeping Covenant with the Book of Discipline”, Rev. Bruce Robbins  
[https://mcusercontent.com/0f311d3342e95b660084ef226/files/b634714f-f6ea-424c-a13a-6a1b51c55973/Keeping\\_Covenant\\_with\\_BOD.pdf](https://mcusercontent.com/0f311d3342e95b660084ef226/files/b634714f-f6ea-424c-a13a-6a1b51c55973/Keeping_Covenant_with_BOD.pdf)
- Judy Jerde ([jaj@hopefultravelers.net](mailto:jaj@hopefultravelers.net))

### **Examples of Altar for All Marriage Equality statements**

[https://mcusercontent.com/0f311d3342e95b660084ef226/files/ad47435b-1f00-406d-8eb8-4733c1ae7bb4/Altar\\_for\\_All\\_Marriage\\_Equality\\_statements.pdf](https://mcusercontent.com/0f311d3342e95b660084ef226/files/ad47435b-1f00-406d-8eb8-4733c1ae7bb4/Altar_for_All_Marriage_Equality_statements.pdf)

- Faith – St. Anthony Village
- Hamline
- Richfield
- Spirit of Hope

Information compiled by Judy Jerde, MN Reconciling Congregations and Faith UMC – St. Anthony Village ([jaj@hopefultravelers.net](mailto:jaj@hopefultravelers.net)), November 2020