

General Conference 2019 Reflection from Rev. Karen Dammann

I was in the 1st grade when President Kennedy was assassinated. We were adding numbers in class when the principal came in to tell us the President had been shot and school was out for the rest of the day. My brother and I walked right home. My mom was surprised to see us come in the door, and when we told her the news, she turned on the TV and we watched with the rest of the world as we learned that he had died.

When supper time came, our neighbor brought us a hot dish and a half gallon of ice cream. Someone else brought a pie. The next morning more dishes arrived at our house. This went on for several days. Each time the person delivering the food would offer their sympathy to our family on the death of President Kennedy. He was our first Catholic president. We were the only Catholic family in a little Iowa town with one Presbyterian church and one Dutch Reformed church.

This past week has reminded me of that sad shocking week in November 1963. This time it was the unbelievable news that the United Methodist Church had decided to continue its policy of excluding LGBTQ+ from full participation in the life of the church by refusing to allow marriage for our relationships or ordination for our ministries. While I knew it was a possibility that this could happen, I simply did not believe it would come to pass. But it did. In the midst of my grief and tears, I found myself wondering if the trial I went through 15 years ago meant anything at all, if the trauma that followed mattered, or was it all for naught?

Last week reminded me of that week from my childhood because of the outpouring of support and love that I experienced. During this week of the general conference, people I barely knew reached out in friendship. Colleagues called, texted or sent emails to check in on me. Our district superintendent wrote a blog that, for some reason, left me weeping at my desk. Every time there was bad news from the conference, an Alaskan deaconess who was there would text or call me personally to tell me what had happened. Someone brought me flowers. In Juneau, folks came over to me in the coffee shop to touch my shoulder and tell me they heard the news, and was there anything I needed. People who knew my son asked him if I was going to be ok, would I lose my job, and was there anything they could do for us.

Then there were the folks who asked me how my congregation was doing. They wanted to know if they could help in any way. Especially folks from the LGBTQ+ community who have experienced our efforts of radical hospitality in the last two years. One man stopped me on Mendenhall Lake while I walked my dog, and with tears flowing down his cheeks said our building was the first church he had set foot in since the days of the AIDS epidemic. He wanted to know if we could still have our Friday LGBTQ+ dinners, or were they now over, was the fellowship going to go away.

I could write more, but you get the idea. If you are part of the LGBTQ+ family, if your congregation is openly Reconciling so folks have found a safe place to know God's love with you, know this: People love us and care about us. The expressions of love I

experienced last week tell me that bigotry will not be the final word. While we wait for the Bishops of the West to meet to discern what is next for the people called United Methodist in Alaska, we are surrounded by a community of concern and love. While I experience this as an ending, and maybe you feel the same way, I know in my heart it is also a beginning. I am ready to work on what comes next—which I know will be an expression of full inclusion - where there is a place for everyone at the table.

Karen Dammann