



# Love Prevails

revolution 3-D: disclose(t), divest, disrupt

April 17, 2018

Dear Bishop Ough,

It came to my attention that you hadn't received a copy of my recently published monograph *Nothing About Us Without Us: LGBTQ Liberation and The United Methodist Church*. I wrote this article upon an invitation to participate in the most recent GBHEM Colloquy on *Missio Dei* and the future of the United Methodist Church. I have included a copy of the book with a hard copy of this letter.

To prepare for writing this essay, I looked over every communication Love Prevails had with the Connectional Table (CT) and the Council of Bishops (COB) from 2012-2016. I reviewed every event documented by video during that same period. As I mined that documentation for information, I relived a lot of those events. This re-visitation caused me to realize how constant your presence has been in Love Prevails' journey. Your presence and reactions were an underlying thread linking the progression of Love Prevails' work as we attempted to disrupt the narrative and practice of LGBTQ exclusion at the heart of our denomination's life.

I remembered that I wrote a personal, handwritten letter to you after the first time Love Prevails disrupted the Council of Bishops and Connectional Table meetings in November of 2013. I came across a photocopy. In it, I described my experience of singing the names of LGBTQ leaders who had been lost to the denomination over a CT leadership report that was being read. You intervened to get the members of the CT to stand and collectively shout the report over my singing. Which didn't work. Eventually, Ms. Cythia Kent intervened to stop the meeting, and the group ended up having some fairly substantive conversations that day.

In my handwritten letter to you following that meeting, I shared:

*What I really want to say to you is, in the midst of all that disruption and conversation, I really felt like you were trying. You were trying to be open, you were trying to let the Spirit do something, you were trying to give many people voice. I appreciated the way you articulated not to blame Love Prevails for bringing a conversation to the table that, you admitted, was being avoided. I appreciate you were doing your best to listen, to be*

*flexible, respectful. I hope that you feel, like I did, that the Spirit really was present there moving us to something new, deeper.*

*I do think that Spirit-moment was fairly fleeting, however. It didn't take long for the group to return to institutional equilibrium and institutional speech. But the moments remained the moments, and perhaps they will have an effect going forward. Perhaps not.*

*I also liked your sermon. PRAY. RISK. BREATHE. I'm afraid I do not see or experience too much of the second one from church leaders, particularly from bishops. I hope one day, Bishop Ough, on this matter of heterosexism and LGBTQ exclusion in the UMC, that I will see you RISK. I don't know what that would look like for you, but I hope to know it when it happens.*

It is remarkable how accurately that letter portrays the trajectory of my experience as a member of Love Prevails. While our actions are regarded as controversial and we may have acted imperfectly, I testify to the presence of the Spirit in many of our Disruptive moments, which activated the possibility of changing *The Book of Discipline* into the reality we are currently living as a denomination. Because you have also been there at all of those moments I believe you know that I am telling the truth.

In every case of the spirit sparking change, the return to institutional equilibrium, institutional speech and institutional processes inevitably came. I contend to you the following. You, as the primary leader interacting with us over time, recognized the unpredictability of our actions and the potential of the Spirit, through Love Prevails, to break through and break down the institutionalization of oppression that is anathema to the Spirit's being. At some point, you and others decided that institutional leadership and processes could no longer tolerate those Disruptions. So you decided to militarize your meetings beginning at the Council of Bishops' meetings in Oklahoma City in 2014 and going forward. This is now the standard practice for all Commission on the Way Forward (CWF) meetings.

For a while you tolerated us. For a few meetings you actually welcomed us. But that could only last so long because our presence forced the institution to deal with its hatred and homophobia too forcefully and too quickly. Dealing with us was, despite your stated consistency over time in asking others to do take risks, too risky. Institutionally, you became unable to respond with anything other than force and the exclusion of executive sessions. I am truly sorry that you could not consider how to be in relationship with Love Prevails more creatively, despite our many overtures and invitations. I suspect you think that these invitations felt too much like demands for your liking. My own experience of them was more like cries and songs.

Sadly, what I have felt from you since those early days, in relation to Love Prevails, is a hardening and building of walls rather than a loosening of bonds. I feel quite certain that you personally believe that all of the language that discriminates against LGBTQ people should be removed from the *Book of Discipline* and that exclusion and discrimination should end. Yet you have not led in such a way to state unequivocally and prophetically your belief and lead the church in this direction. You are not alone in this. The simple majority of bishops who also hold the same personal views about LGBTQ inclusion and changing the *Discipline* are all walking around with some intense moral injury, as you sometimes silently and sometimes actively perpetrate viscous forms of the harm that you hypocritically say you decry. You may respond that I do not know what goes on behind closed doors. Which is the nature of the problem itself,

and a failure of transparency that the bishops promised, which fell from your lips, upon the creation of an offering of a way forward.

Currently much of our episcopal leadership bears witness to your episcopal vows to unify the church while it simultaneously bears false witness against the LGBTQ people you know full well to be fully equal children of God. I feel sorry that you are bound to uphold the laws which burden you with the maintenance of a church literally hell-bent on the retaining the vestiges of “homosexuality as sin” when you know the truth to be otherwise. I don’t accuse you alone of this false witness. I collectively accuse you episcopal leaders who refuse to bear up your collective courage to turn this ship towards an unequivocally clear statement of equality for LGBTQ people in this denomination, and to end the categorical discrimination. If you wanted to, you actually could do this together. If this does not happen, it is a collective failure of your moral and political will.

I hear rumors that the bishops’ proposal for unity may unite around the complete removal of the incompatibility language in our *Book of Discipline*. In the end, if the currently circulating CWF/COB proposals refuse to uphold in practice the theological commitments we make at our membership vows in and the promises we make to every human we baptize to “resist oppression in whatever form it presents itself,” the entire church enterprise shows up as a morally bankrupt witness within its own walls and beyond. Everyone knows this.

This upcoming Council of Bishops meeting to formalize a proposal to General Conference 2019 is historic. This is your opportunity, Bruce Ough, to lead in condemning oppression towards LGBTQ persons in the strongest of terms. Since all of your substantive meetings are behind closed doors, your leadership may never be known to us, but it will be known to you. I hope you will RISK. I hope I will see and know it when it happens. I am nonetheless sadly cynical that you, or most of our episcopal leaders, will lead in ways that lead to the end of formal discrimination towards LGBTQ people in the UMC and towards equality. I sincerely invite you and all other bishops to prove me completely wrong. I truly mean this.

This is a personal letter to you that I will make public. I do not expect your response, though I invite it. If you do respond, know that I am likely to make it public.

Yours in Christ,

Rev. Dr. Julie Todd