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To the members of Highland Park United Methodist Church and the people of the Horizon Texas Conference:
Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I write as your bishop and as a fellow follower of Jesus, in a season that has asked a great deal of all of us. I know many of you at Highland Park are grieving, confused or weary. I know many across our conference are watching with concern and praying for a congregation you love. I'm writing to all of you together, because what happens at Highland Park matters to the whole connection, and because we belong to one another.

This past Sunday, Highland Park held a town hall to talk about its future. I'm grateful that its leaders want members to have a voice in that future. So do I. I also know that strong words were spoken, including some about me. I'm not writing to answer them one by one. What I want to offer instead is a word about who we are and the covenant we share.

In Ephesians 4, Paul writes to the church, urging them to live "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." He describes the church as a body "joined and knit together by every ligament," with each part doing its work.
Paul doesn't say unity happens when everyone agrees. He says to make every effort. Unity takes work. It asks for humility and patience, especially in seasons like this one.

Scripture has a word for this kind of belonging: covenant.

A contract says, "I'll keep my part if you keep yours." A covenant says, "We belong to each other, and we'll keep faith even when it's hard." God made covenant with Abraham and Sarah and with Israel at Sinai. Again and again, the people struggled to keep it, and again and again God stayed faithful and called them home. At the Last Supper, Jesus took the cup and called it the new covenant, and he shared it with friends who would soon deny him and run away.

Covenant isn't about control. It's a promise to hold on to one another with love that is both truthful and patient.

United Methodists live covenant through what we call the connection. From the beginning, John Wesley didn't build independent congregations. He built a connection of people and places accountable to one another and sharing the work of the gospel. That spirit shapes our life today:

- **Pastors are sent, not hired.** Congregations and clergy receive one another as a shared trust.
- **We share resources.** Our giving supports ministries no single church could sustain alone, including campus ministries, disaster response, new faith communities and care for clergy and their families. Highland Park's generosity has blessed that shared work for generations, and I'm grateful.
- **Our property is held in trust.** Since Wesley's day, Methodist property has been held in trust for the whole church. That isn't a claim of ownership by any bishop or conference. It's a promise that what one generation builds remains for mission in the next. None of us owns Highland Park United Methodist Church. Jesus Christ is the head of the church.
- **We make vows.** Every member promises to support the church with their prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness. Every pastor promises to live within the covenant we share. Those vows bind all of us: bishops, superintendents, clergy and laity alike.

None of this makes us perfect. Our structures can feel heavy, and large and small congregations experience them differently. Some of the frustration Highland Park's leaders have expressed is real, and it deserves to be heard. But at the heart of our connection is a simple conviction: we are stronger, more faithful and more accountable together than alone. That is a partnership, and it's the partnership I want with Highland Park.

My concern has always been about governance, never about Highland Park's faith, its ministry or its people. Changes were made to the church's governing documents in 2022, and the conference believes those changes don't fit with the covenant every United Methodist congregation shares. For many months we sought to resolve this through conversation. When the concerns remained unresolved, the conference asked a civil court to help clarify the questions involved.

What we have asked for is narrow. We have asked that Highland Park restore the governance in place before November 2022: reinstate "United" in the church's legal name, restore references to the Book of Discipline in its governing documents and restore members' participation in the governance of their church. That request, and my September 18 letter, are on the conference website.

I don't want Highland Park to become a different church. I want it to keep being the church it has been for more than a century: a congregation of United Methodist Christians, in covenant with the wider connection, offering Christ to Dallas and the world.

To Highland Park members: you don't have to choose between loving your church and loving the connection. You can ask questions, seek information and pray for your leaders and for me, all at once. If you'd like to talk with someone, my office will connect you with a pastor who will listen.

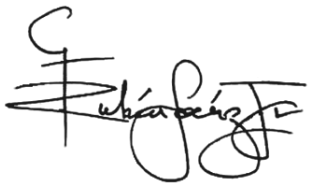
To everyone across our conference: please be gentle with one another. Stay with what's known and resist rumor. Be careful online. Make room for people who see this differently, because they belong here too. Keep sabbath and check on one another.

The door to conversation remains open. My hope is not for one side to win. My hope is for restoration and reconciliation.

Please pray with me:

Faithful God, you make covenant with your people and keep it, even when we falter. Bless Highland Park United Methodist Church: its members, clergy, staff and leaders. Comfort those who are hurting and strengthen those who are weary. Bless our conference and all who carry this season in their hearts. Give us humility, gentleness and patience. Guard our words and keep us from turning neighbors into enemies. Where there is division, make a way toward reconciliation. Join and knit us together again, so that your church may grow in love. In the name of Jesus Christ, who breaks down every dividing wall. Amen.

Grace and peace,



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