

Homosexuality, the Church, and the Reconciling Conversation An Open Letter to the Congregation from the Advocacy Ministry Team

Dear Friends,

For many years – indeed for more than a decade – there has been considerable discussion and study at Metropolitan Memorial on the subject of homosexuality and the church; but Metropolitan Memorial has not yet taken an official stance on this issue. At the urging of the Advocacy Ministry Team, Metropolitan’s clergy and Church Council have agreed to renew a congregation-wide conversation on this subject and to consider later this spring whether or not to adopt a statement on this issue.

This special edition of *The Messenger* marks the beginning of a period of discernment and discussion designed to engage our entire congregation in a conversation around the question of homosexuality and the church. Knowing that people of good faith can differ on this subject, we invite everyone to take part, learn, listen, and be heard. A number of learning and discussion events are planned in the coming weeks and months, including a special sermon series, a number of special events in the Great Hall, and a performance by the Metro Players of “The Laramie Project.” A schedule of events is found on page two.

In the pages that follow, you also will find background information on the United Methodist Church’s policies regarding homosexuality, a first draft of a proposed reconciling statement for Metropolitan, and responses to questions frequently asked in the reconciling conversation.

The Advocacy Ministry Team will be working to guide this process. If you would like to be part of this effort, or if you have thoughts or opinions to share, please contact Advocacy Ministry Team Chair Ann Michel, amichel@wesleyseminary.edu or Co-Chair Paul Dame, pdameinmd@aol.com.

We invite you to enter this time of discussion, dialogue, and discernment prayerfully and with open hearts.

Sincerely,

Charlie Rev. Sundry Rees Anne P. Brown
Alan Lattimer Suzanne Foush Pat Huse
Just Simple Ann Michel
Leester Brown John B. Tate Jr. Mary Jo Marchant
Paul Dame

Members of the Advocacy Ministry Team

Why Take this Journey Now?

by Dr. Charles Parker

When I had my introductory meeting with the Staff-Parish Relations Committee last year, one member of the committee asked, “We have been talking about becoming a Reconciling Congregation for the better part of 10 years. Would you be comfortable helping us bring that process to closure?” Well, as supportive of the reconciling movement as I am personally, I would never have raised this issue in my first year, because it is a sensitive one to explore, particularly as a congregation and a new pastor are getting to know each other. However, it quickly became clear to me, that many of you had been discussing this for a long time, and that there was a great deal of internal energy to move this process forward. So here we are.

In addition to the fact that there are many members of our congregation who would like to move forward on this issue, there are other reasons why I think that this is the right time for us to have this discussion. As our Church Council has moved ahead in its visioning process, one of the themes that we keep returning to is our Biblical call to show hospitality to the stranger. What greater way to show hospitality to our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters than to declare explicitly that they are a welcome part of our church family.

Some of you have noted, “We’re welcoming to everyone here. Why do we need to be explicitly welcoming of gay and lesbian persons?” The short answer is, because so many churches are explicitly unwelcoming. The longer answer is that our own denomination sends very mixed signals on this issue: on the one hand, we describe ourselves as a church of “Open Minds, Open Hearts, and Open Doors,” and state that homosexuals are “individuals of sacred worth”; on the other hand, we also state that the practice of homosexuality is “incompatible with Christian teaching,” that homosexual couples may not have their committed relationships blessed by the church, and that practicing homosexuals may not be ordained as clergy. So there are plenty of reasons for us to be explicit about our inclusion of gay and lesbian people into our community.

This is particularly important in a year in which we hold General Conference. Every General Conference for the past thirty-some years has involved a passionate floor fight over our Disciplinary language on homosexuality. Regardless of how the language may or may not change this year, the impression will get conveyed (accurately) that many churches and people within our denomination are not welcoming of the gay and lesbian persons in their midst. I think that that necessitates our being very explicit about where we stand.

This is an important issue for us as a denomination and as a congregation; and, Friends, there are people of good will and integrity on all sides. John Wesley called for Methodist communities to be places in which people of good will and integrity could disagree and still continue to be in fellowship together. That is my fervent hope for us as a Metropolitan community. I hope that we can engage in this dialogue with energy and integrity, and at the end of the day, still celebrate that we are family.



Dr. Charles Parker

Discussion and Learning Opportunities

Beginning Sunday, March 30, there will be a number of special opportunities for thoughtful discernment and discussion on the reconciling issue, including a three-week sermon series and a five-week guest speaker series in the Great Hall. To make these Great Hall sessions available to everyone, they will be offered during the 10:10 a.m. Study Hour and repeated after the 11:15 a.m. worship service. The second session will include a light lunch.

Sermon Series:

Homosexuality and the Church

Sundays April 20 – May 4

A three-week sermon series on the subject of homosexuality and the church will be offered April 20 – May 4. As the series begins, we welcome back to our pulpit Dr. William A. Holmes, who served as Senior Pastor of Metropolitan Memorial from 1975-1998, and Dr. Mary E. Kraus, who served as an associate at Metropolitan from 1982 - 1984. Dr. Kraus is now pastor of Dumbarton UMC in Georgetown.



Sunday, April 20
Rev. Dr. William A. Holmes
Minister emeritus
Metropolitan Memorial UMC



Sunday, April 27
Rev. Dr. Mary E. Kraus
Minister
Dumbarton UMC



Sunday, May 4
Rev. Dr. Charles A. Parker
Senior Minister
Metropolitan Memorial UMC

The Metropolitan Players Present

The Laramie Project

April 25, 26 & 27

(not recommended for children under 12)

Friday, April 25 - 8 p.m. • Saturday, April 26 - 5 p.m.

Sunday, April 27 - 2 p.m.

On Behalf of the church, the Advocacy Team and Metropolitan Players encourage you to attend one of the performances as a way to further our discussion about becoming a Reconciling Congregation. Please invite your friends and neighbors. There will be no charge for admission, but donations will be accepted. Please contact Pat House at phouse@mmumc-dc.org or 202.363.4900, ext. 23 for reservations.

Guest Speaker Series: “First Person Voices”

Presented Sunday Mornings
at 10:10 a.m. and 12:30 p.m.

March 30 – *What the Bible Says about Homosexuality*
Dr. Youtha Hardman-Cromwell, member of Trinity UMC in the Alexandria District and Director of Practice in Ministry and Mission at Wesley Theological Seminary, will discuss theological interpretations of what the Bible “says” about homosexuality.

April 6 – *Relative Freedom*, a short documentary
Joe Kuehne, local filmmaker, will present and discuss his documentary short film, *Relative Freedom*. The film details Kuehne’s journey to interview members of his immediate family on how they feel about his homosexuality, whether they believe it to be a sin, and whether it means he will go to hell. The film documents the family’s difficulty reconciling their love for their son/brother with their firm religious beliefs and raises questions of faith and spirituality, sexuality, and family relationships. Mr. Kuehne will share his experiences struggling to reconcile his religious upbringing and spiritual maturation with his sexuality.

April 13 – *Methodist Church Doctrine*
Rev. Dr. J. Phillip Wogaman, president of the American Theological Society and professor emeritus of Christian Ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary, will discuss Methodist church doctrine on homosexuality.

April 27 – *United Methodist and Gay*
Rev. Thomas Starnes, a former District Superintendent, and his son, **Floyd Starnes**, who is openly gay, will share reflections on being gay in the United Methodist Church.

May 4 – *Reflections on “The Laramie Project”*
Cast members from the Metro Player’s production of **The Laramie Project** will discuss the play and explore what it says about us as Christians and a society.

To Be Announced - *Finishing the Journey* (2nd Series)

Homosexuality and United Methodist Doctrine

What does the *United Methodist Book of Discipline* say about Homosexuality?

•It declares homosexuals to be individuals of sacred worth who should not be rejected or condemned but also declares homosexual practice to be incompatible with Christian teaching.

Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God's grace is available to all, and we will seek to live together in Christian community. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons. ¶161G

•Supports basic human and civil liberties regardless of sexual orientation.

Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to supporting those rights and liberties for homosexual persons. We see a clear issue of simple justice in protecting their rightful claims where they have shared material resources, pensions, guardian relationships, mutual powers of attorney, and other such lawful claims typically attendant to contractual relationships that involve shared contributions, responsibilities, and liabilities, and equal protection before the law. Moreover, we support efforts to stop violence and other forms of coercion against gays and lesbians. We also commit ourselves to social witness against the coercion and marginalization of former homosexuals. ¶162 H

•It prohibits the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals.

Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church. ¶ 304.3

•It prohibits the celebration of homosexual unions.

Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches. ¶ 341.5

•It prohibits the expenditure of denominational funds to promote acceptance of homosexuality.

... no board, agency, committee, commission, or council shall give United Methodist funds to any gay caucus or group, or otherwise use such funds to promote the acceptance of homosexuality. ¶ 806.9

Why does our church doctrine say “the practice of homosexuality” is “incompatible with Christian teaching?”

By Rev. John Thornburg

Anyone who has ever attended a General Conference knows church doctrine isn't formed as a result of a Pentecost-like unanimity. It is always the result of compromise among passionate people.

At the 1976 General Conference, and at every one since, there have been two sets of conflicting passions over the issue of homosexuality and the church. The first is how the Bible is to be understood. The second is how to be a faithful church.

Our Social Principles declare that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, because the majority of voting delegates over the years have continued to believe that:

- The teaching of Scripture is clear and unequivocal, and/or
- The church would be torn apart if it were seen to condone anything other than celibacy for gay men and lesbians.

I say “and/or” because many United Methodists, including several in key leadership positions, no longer believe the teaching of Scripture is unequivocal, but they are reluctant to be the first to stand up and admit they've changed their minds.

The minority voices have argued that the Bible has both timeless truths and time-bound teachings. They offer reminders that the church has previously repented of its adherence to time-bound teachings (such as its defense of slavery), and they believe it ought to do so again on this issue. The minority voices also have argued that when church unity is achieved by silencing or marginalizing a group of God's children, it is no unity at all.

So what will happen now? Will we decide that God can work within the tension between the various voices? I pray that we will, because otherwise we dismiss all we've come to understand since 1976. Since 1976, the realities related to homosexuality and the church also have experienced a significant shift. Then, the only gay men and lesbians visible to church leaders were the activist pioneers whose zealous style was perceived as inflammatory and anti-establishment. Today, because so many dedicated gay Christians have had the courage to come out, church leaders know legions of gay men and lesbians whose mainstream lives stand as quiet testimony to their cause.

In 1976, North American culture was still under the sway of Sigmund Freud's understanding of homosexuality as a form of immaturity. In fact, embrace of Freud was a central argument in the floor debate during the General Conferences of the '70s. Now, Freud's interpretation of homosexuality is all but banished from psychiatry.

God is at work in this tension. Silence or diminishing the minority voices endangers God's work.

Thornberg is the former pastor of Northaven UMC in Dallas, TX. That material is reprinted with permission from *Finishing the Journey*, copyright Northaven UMC, 2000.

Draft Reconciling Statement

The following statement has been drafted by the Advocacy Ministry Team for consideration by Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church. In formulating this statement, the committee carefully studied similar statements adopted by Capitol Hill, Dumbarton, Foundry, Wesley, and other United Methodist Churches in our area and other United Methodist Conferences.

The statement is still only a draft. It has been approved by no group other than the Advocacy Ministry Team. Comments are welcome. Please contact Advocacy Ministry Team Chair, Ann Michel, amichel@wesleyseminary.edu or Co-Chair, Paul Dame, pdameinmd@aol.com.

Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church affirms that all individuals are of sacred worth and embraces the diversity of human beings as a gift from God. We celebrate our human family without regard to race, ethnicity, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, age, religion, education, marital circumstances, economic status, education, physical and mental condition, or criminal history.

We welcome and include gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender persons, and their families, as a reflection of God's unconditional love. We believe that prejudice, hatred, or discrimination directed against such persons is contrary to Christ's central message of love. And we feel strongly that no interpretation of Scripture is correct that encourages judgment or contempt of such persons.

Therefore, we declare ourselves to be a reconciling congregation and associate ourselves with the Reconciling Ministries Network within the United Methodist Church. We proclaim that the principles of reconciliation apply with equal force to all aspects of the life of our congregation, including our ministers, lay leaders, employees, members, and visitors. Knowing that gay and lesbian persons are already making rich contributions to the church's life at every level, we affirm and welcome their full participation in the ministry of the church.

At the same time, we recognize that there remain differences of opinion among us on issues relating to sexuality. We do not seek to erase our differences, but to journey together in faith toward greater understanding and mutual respect.

Shorter Statement

Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church affirms that all individuals are of sacred worth without regard to race, ethnicity, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, age, religion, education, marital circumstances, economic status, education, physical and mental condition, or criminal history. We declare ourselves to be a reconciling congregation and welcome and include gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender persons, and their families, as a reflection of God's unconditional love. At the same time, we recognize differences of opinion on issues of sexuality and seek to journey together in faith toward greater understanding and mutual respect.

The Advocacy Ministry Team Answers Questions About Metropolitan Becoming a Reconciling Congregation

What does it mean to become a “Reconciling Congregation?” “Reconciling Congregation” is the term generally used in United Methodist congregations and recognized beyond the church to refer to a congregation that officially declares itself in support of full participation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the life of the United Methodist Church, both in policy and practice. The Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN) is a national grassroots organization of United Methodist individuals, congregations, campus ministries, and other groups working for the full participation of all people in the United Methodist Church.

What is the process for becoming a reconciling congregation? The Church Council has the authority to adopt a reconciling statement on behalf of congregation, or to decide to convene a congregational meeting for that purpose. A congregation-wide effort to encourage education and discussion of the issue would precede this action, following on the many years of discussion and discernment that have already taken place at Metropolitan.

What will be different at Metropolitan if we become a reconciling congregation? Metropolitan Memorial already prides itself on being a community that is open and welcoming. There are openly gay individuals who serve in church leadership roles and on the church staff. And there is no open hostility expressed toward homosexuality in our discourse or proclamation. Because Metropolitan is already very tolerant and accepting of all people, in this most important way, very little will be different for those already in the church. The most important difference would be that becoming a reconciling congregation would make it easier for us to communicate clearly our openness to those who are not yet familiar with our community, and may assume that all churches are anti-gay.

Why isn't it enough to say that we welcome everyone without specifically addressing the issue of sexuality? Unfortunately, our culture and media communicate that Christianity and the Church are anti-gay. And recent, well-publicized events in the United Methodist denomination have reinforced the impression that the Methodist Church is anti-gay. In 2004, Mary Beth Stroud, a minister in Eastern Pennsylvania, was stripped of her clergy credentials because she was in a same-sex relationship. In 2005, the Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church supported a Virginia pastor in his decision to deny church membership to a homosexual man. And in May 2007, our own Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference voted down a petition to strike the phrase from our Discipline saying that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teachings. In light of these well-publicized events, we cannot expect gay and lesbian persons to assume that they are welcome in our congregation unless we specifically tell them they are.

What actions are likely to follow from the adoption of a reconciliation statement?

·Proclamation. We can state clearly and openly where our congregation is on this issue. We may choose to include the fact that we are a reconciling congregation in the bulletins, church website, or advertisements.

·Advocacy. Having an official position on this issue will allow our congregation to join other reconciling congregations within our conference and denomination in supporting changes in church and public policies to prevent discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation.

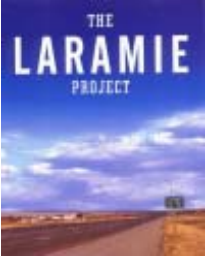
·Welcome and Affirmation. In some reconciling congregations, committees have been formed to support and welcome gay individuals and families, parents of gay children, and to deal with issues of concern. Some of our members may be led to form such an outreach, if Metropolitan becomes a reconciling congregation.

Will Metropolitan become a “Gay Congregation?” The term “gay congregation” is an unfortunate one. Nevertheless, some have expressed the fear that Metropolitan might become a “gay church.” The hope in adopting a reconciling statement certainly is that more gay and lesbian persons will feel welcome at Metropolitan and that those who are already part of the congregation will feel more comfortable. But given the location of Metropolitan and our demographic profile (many older adults and young families), and given that other UM congregations in the city (specifically Foundry and Dumbarton) have well-established ministries reaching the gay community, it is unlikely there will be a major shift in the composition of our congregation following the adoption of a reconciling statement.

Why has Metropolitan not adopted a statement on this issue before? Is it because of widespread controversy or opposition? Metropolitan Memorial has been engaged in discussion and discernment on the issue of homosexuality and the church for over a decade; however, the issue has never been brought before the congregation for formal action. Many believe the reason it has taken so long is simply because we have been busy and distracted by so many other things in the life of our church - frequent pastoral and staff changes, two capital campaigns and building projects, and the Eldbrooke merger. Unfortunately, however, our inaction may be inadvertently creating the impression that the issue of homosexuality is more controversial at Metropolitan than it really is.

As in any church community, there is a diversity of opinion at Metropolitan on issues related to homosexuality and the church. Differences of opinion on this issue are likely to remain, whether or not we adopt a reconciling statement. The statement would not seek to erase or silence our differences, but invite all to journey together in faith toward greater understanding and mutual respect on this issue.

Why *The Laramie Project* and Why Now?



In October 1998 a twenty-one-year-old student at the University of Wyoming was kidnapped, severely beaten and left to die, tied to a fence on the outskirts of Laramie, Wyoming. His name was Matthew Shepard, and he was the victim of this assault because he was gay. There are moments in history when a particular event brings the various ideologies and beliefs prevailing in a culture into sharp focus. At these junctures, the event becomes a lightning rod of sorts, attracting and distilling the essence of these philosophies and convictions. By paying careful attention in moments like this to people's words, one is able to hear the way these prevailing ideas affect not only individual lives but also the culture at large. The brutal murder of Matthew Shepard was an event of this kind. In its immediate aftermath, the nation launched into a dialogue that brought to the surface how we think and talk about homosexuality, sexual politics, education, class, violence, privileges and rights and the difference between tolerance and acceptance."

Playwright Moises Kaufman

From the Introduction to *The Laramie Project*

In November 1998 just four weeks after the murder of Matthew Shepard, nine members of the Tectonic Theater Project and Moises Kaufman traveled to Laramie, Wyoming, to collect interviews that might become material for a play. The project lasted over two years, including six trips and over 200 interviews. When asked about this experience, Kaufman replied, "[t]he experience of working on *The Laramie Project* has been one of great sadness, great beauty and, perhaps most importantly great revelations – about our nation, about our ideas, about ourselves. . . . [T]his is not a play about Matthew Shepard it is a play about Laramie."

Over the years, the selection of plays by Metropolitan Players, dramas and comedies alike, have been chosen on the basis of their ability to fully integrate with other ministries of the church. Metropolitan is at a crossroads and the presentation of *The Laramie Project* allows us as a community to set aside our personal views and share in an experience, albeit a horrifying incident, and through the telling of the story to experience a maelstrom of emotions: anger, sorrow, bewilderment, and most poignantly, a defiant glimmer of hope. In the deliberate, simple staging of this play, 20 actors embody 60 different characters and although it is difficult to ignore the brutality of the crime, the actors become the touchstone that allows us to transcend these images; returning again and again to the theme "it can't happen here," and "yet it has." *The Laramie Project* explores the depths to which humanity can sink and the heights of compassion of which we are all capable.

Excerpts from Director Frances Bartley Cleaver's opening remarks to the Metro Players prior to the first rehearsal for *The Laramie Project*

"The church has recognized the value of dramatic presentation to help raise the consciousness of the congregation as an element in a discernment process. While I was up in New Hampshire, I received a call from Pat House, representing the Advocacy Team, asking me to direct an appropriate play; immediately I answered, "Yes!" For me personally, it was coming full-circle, supporting a cause, which had captured me in the mid-1980's. As I write this I am reminded that my concern actually went back as early as the 1950's from a disturbing experience in summer stock. Charlie Parker mentioned in a recent sermon that sometimes God doesn't answer immediately! So, here we are. Presented with a challenge. This time we have been 'called' to be prophetic voices and to open hearts and minds; and to do so at a moment of discernment in the life of the congregation. Thanks be to God!

Father Schmidt says to the actors (and to us) 'you must say it right – you must do it, but you must do it correct.' And, so we must, do it correctly. How? We will find a way, together. Of one thing I am sure: we must honor these people who have bared their souls to us, whether we approve of what they say or have any reservations. There will be no stereotypes. We will make every attempt to get inside them, to place ourselves where each person is at each moment, to feel his pain, her questioning, their growing. Yes, even their heresy. They have given the gift of themselves and from them we shall learn."

For More Information on the Reconciling Issue...

Finishing the Journey is a book to help guide congregations through the issue of homosexuality and the church. Published by Northhaven UMC, it has been written by 15 Methodists, most of whom are ministers and seminary scholars.

<http://www.northaven.org/publish.htm>

Reconciling Ministries Network is a national grassroots organization of United Methodist individuals, congregations, campus ministries, and other groups working for the full participation of all people in the United Methodist Church.

<http://www.rmnetwork.org/>

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is a grassroots organization working to obtain complete equality for the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) community.

<http://thetaskforce.org/issues/faith>

Rev. Mary Beth Stroud, a Methodist minister, was defrocked for being lesbian

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/10/31/national/main998876.shtml>

2005 Case of Virginia Pastor who denied membership to a gay man:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/27/AR2005102702148.html>

PASTORAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE MINISTRIES

Rev. Dr. Charles A. Parker · Senior Pastor, ext. 11

Rev. Sandy Rector · Congregational Ministries, ext. 19

Rev. Faith Lewis · Minister of Youth and Outreach, ext. 22

CHILDREN AND YOUTH MINISTRIES

Kay Jacobi · Director of Children's Ministries, ext. 26

WORSHIP, MUSIC, AND ARTS MINISTRIES

Patrisha S. House · Director of Worship, Music, and Arts

Bruce H. Caviness · Organist Choirmaster

Casey Elliott · Dayspring Choir Director & Worship Leader

Jill Cottine · Soprano Soloist, Chancel Choir

Adam Tyler · Pianist for Dayspring Choir & 9am Worship

Beth Revell · Alto Section Leader, Dayspring Choir

Courtney Williams · Bass Section Leader, Dayspring Choir

Barbara Gaskill · Director of Liturgical Dance

Susan G. Staines · Director of Handbell Choir

Pamela R. Settlage · Director of Cherub Choir

Douglass Anne Cartwright · Director of Morningstar Choir

SUPPORT MINISTRIES

Dona Collary · Director of Church Administration, ext. 17

Jeff Clouser · Database Administrator, ext. 25

Eric Gunnerson · Director of Building and Grounds, ext. 20

METROPOLITAN NURSERY SCHOOL STAFF

Bruce Kahan, Interim Director

· **Laura Bensman** · **Caroline Cole**

· **Anne Fitzgerald** · **Donna Parzow** · **Peggy Stone**

· **Karen Swagart**

THE MESSENGER is published by: Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church
3401 Nebraska Ave. NW., Washington, DC 20016 Tel: 202-363-4900 Fax: 202-686-2056
E-Mail: jclouser@mmumc-dc.org website: <http://www.nationalchurch.org>

NEXT ISSUE: April 4, 2008 USPS No. 0007-308

NEXT DEADLINE: Noon on April 1, 2008

*Periodical Class Postage Paid
At Washington D.C*

MAILED March 21 PLEASE DELIVER PROMPTLY

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to THE MESSENGER, 3401 Nebraska Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20016.