

“Two Separate But Overlapping Issues for our UMC”

by Bishop Mike Coyner

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Our United Methodist Church is heading toward a special session of the General Conference which will attempt to address two separate but overlapping issues. The first issue is the debate over our denomination’s official stance on the issues of human sexuality, in particular our prohibitions against same-gender marriages and against “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” being eligible for ordination or appointment. A second issue is overlapping but separate and that is the issue of “keeping the covenant” by obedience to our Book of Discipline.

Perhaps it would be helpful to explore these issues as both different and overlapping.

A “Johari window” is often used to explore how two different issues or values can be compared and contrasted. For the two issues listed above, such a window would include the following:

- Desire to see our stance on sexuality changed = CHANGE
- Concerned about disobedience = OBEY
- Desire to see our stand on sexuality maintained = MAINTAIN
- Believe disobedience is justified = DISOBEY

Putting those into a Johari window would result in these quadrants;

- CHANGE / OBEY
- CHANGE / DISOBEY
- MAINTAIN / OBEY
- MAINTAIN / DISOBEY

There are persons who are willing to see our UMC change or modify our stance on homosexuality, but they are concerned about the disobedience to our Discipline. Such persons say to me, “I am willing to see us modify our stance but I don’t trust those who have shown disregard for our rules to obey them even if we do modify our stance.” We could label such persons as “Change / Obey.”

Likewise there are persons who are so committed to a Change in our stance on homosexuality that they believe Disobedience is required to protest our current stance. We could label such persons as “Change / Disobey.”

Of course many of our more traditionally-minded persons would be placed in the quadrant “Maintain / Obey” because they want our current stance on homosexuality to be maintained and for the rules to be enforced more strongly.

And finally there are persons who are so committed to our current stance on homosexuality maintained that they are willing to Disobey our rules and withhold apportionments or seek to get around our Trust Clause so they can leave with their property and assets if they don’t get their way.

While I cannot guess (without further study or surveys) how many United Methodists fall into each of these four quadrants (and likely some straddle the lines and don't fit neatly into any one quadrant), it may be helpful to realize that part of the confusion and debate arises from our failure to recognize that we are dealing with more than one issue in our UMC.

Obviously some of the Plans being brought to the 2019 General Conference fall more neatly into some of the quadrants listed above. The "Traditional Plan" fits neatly into the "Maintain / Obey" quadrant, although there likely are some persons who favor the Traditional Plan more on the "Maintain" side and some more on the "Obey" side. Some persons have said to me, for example, "Let's adopt the Traditional Plan, force better compliance to our rules, and then be open to considering changes to our stance on homosexuality." Those persons seem to realize that the issue of homosexuality will not be resolved entirely by enforcing our rules, but they do not want to "give in" to changes in our position unless we first secure obedience.

Those who favor the "Simple Plan" for full inclusion of LGBTQ persons would fit most neatly into the "Change / Obey" quadrant because they want our stance on homosexuality changed but then for everyone to obey the new rules of full inclusion once adopted (their plan does not, for example, allow a pastor the freedom to decide NOT to officiate a same-gender wedding).

Those who often label themselves as "Progressive" seem to fit into the quadrant of "Disobey / Change" because of their commitment to change our stance on homosexuality through disobedience to our current rules. It is unclear where they would position themselves once our stance on homosexuality would be changed. Would they then, like the Simple Plan proponents, demand that everyone agree to that new stance?

Those who favor the "One Church Plan" seem to position themselves across the boundary of Change and Maintain by allowing freedom of choice but calling for renewed obedience to whichever choice the Conference or Church makes on the issue of homosexuality.

Those who favor the "Connectional Conference Plan" are wanting to have disobedience to a single Book of Discipline institutionalized into three separate but loosely-connected Connectional Conferences who would then seek to Maintain their individual new sets of rules.

It is entirely possible that I have misplaced some of the Plans or opinions of various persons and groups in our UMC, but my main point is that we need to be clear that we are dealing with more than one issue (not just our stance on homosexuality), and that we need to see the ways that issue is separate but overlapping with the issue of obedience to our covenant as represented by our Book of Discipline.