

Understanding the Present UMC Crisis

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*Holy God,
holy mighty,
holy immortal,
have mercy on us.¹*

The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church (UMC) has called a special general conference of the denomination to meet this coming February 23-26 (2019), in St Louis, Missouri, to deal with long-disputed issues about human sexuality including the ordination of gay and lesbian people and clergy authorization to bless marriages or unions of gay and lesbian people. The Council of Bishops has now received and forwarded to the general conference of 2019 a report from a Task Force on a Way Forward that offers options for the UMC in dealing with these issues. [You can read the full report by clicking here.](#)

The Wesleyan and Methodist way of being Christian will survive this crisis, but many believe that this general conference and the regularly-scheduled general conference of 2020 will be a decisive turning point in the life of the UMC that could lead to very significant changes in the shape of the United Methodist Church and possibly even division into separate denominations.

This paper outlines issues underlying the current crisis (“What Divides Us?”), the proposals from the Commission on a Way Forward that will come to the 2019 called general conference, and some reflections on what could happen if the general conferences of 2019 and 2020 fail to reach a consensus on any of the proposed Ways Forward. My hope is that my words will edify (build up), not tear down (Ephesians 4:29), and will help develop better understanding of the issues that face us. This is written for laity as well clergy and perhaps also for external folks (like external media personnel) who want to understand what is happening in the UMC.

This paper presupposes some knowledge of United Methodist life and history and polity (how the denomination works). I have appended to this paper three pages on “The Organization of United Methodist Church” for those who want to understand more about what’s described here. If you’re not familiar with terms like “general conference” and

¹ The Trisagion prayer; an ancient Eastern Christian liturgy described by St John of Damascus in the 600s AD and utilized in the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom.

“Judicial Council” and “appointive system,” then I’d encourage you to look over those appended pages before or as you’re reading this.

What Divides Us?

A. “*The practice of homosexuality.*”

The overarching issue that most consistently divides us today has to do with one statement and two related prohibitions in the *United Methodist Book of Discipline* referring to homosexual practice:

1. The statement added to the Social Principles in 1972 that, “The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching” (in the 2016 *Discipline*, ¶ 161G, p. 113).
2. The statement added to the chapter on “The Ministry of the Ordained” between 1980 and 1984 that, “self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church” (in the 2016 *Discipline*, ¶ 304.3, p. 226)² and the related chargeable offense for clergy, “being a self-avowed, practicing homosexual” (2016 *Discipline*, ¶ 2702.1, p. 788).
3. The statement added to the same chapter in 1996 that “Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches” (in the 2016 *Discipline*, ¶ 341.6, p. 278) and the related chargeable offense for clergy, “conducting ceremonies which celebrate homosexual unions; or performing same-sex wedding ceremonies” (2016 *Discipline*, ¶ 2702.1, p. 788).

Roughly stated, this overarching issue comes down to whether the United Methodist Church chooses to affirm these existing prohibitions or to remove these prohibitions and allow fuller affirmation and inclusion of “self-avowed and practicing homosexuals” in the life and leadership of the denomination. Although the proposals sometimes use the wide-ranging acronym “LGBTQ,” the issues facing us in the UMC at this point have to do very specifically with the restrictive language about “the practice of homosexuality” and about “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” in the *Book of Discipline* as noted above.

² Cf. also 2016 *Discipline*, ¶ 310.2d, footnote 3, pp. 232-233. The statement was originally added in 1980 but in the Social Principles section of the *Discipline*. The Judicial Council subsequently ruled that material in the Social Principles section could not be legally enforced, and the material was placed in the section on ordained ministry in the 1984 *Discipline*.

This issue is tied to a wide range of other theological and cultural issues, including liberality and conservatism in the churches, the meaning of our doctrinal standards on the authority of the scriptures, the calling and experience of gay and lesbian Christians, scientific issues about whether homosexuality is a choice or a genetically- and/or socially-influenced orientation, and the changes in broader cultures with respect to acceptance and affirmation of homosexual people. It's beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate the Biblical and moral and scientific issues that are involved here concerning homosexual practice.³

United Methodist general conferences from 1976 through 2008 voted fairly consistently against changing this statement and these prohibitions with majorities typically in the range of 600 delegates voting to retain the 1972 statement and to add the prohibitions, and about 300 delegates opposing the statement in the Social Principles and the added prohibitions related to it. The 2016 General conference voted to delay voting on these issues, setting up the called general conference that will occur in 2019.

The issues about homosexual practice that are currently so divisive in the UMC are very largely issues for United Methodist within the United States, where these questions have become central, polarizing political as well as cultural issues. In some other contexts, traditional stances towards homosexual practice remain in place as well as civil, legal prohibitions against it. In yet other contexts, the issues simply have not been as divisive as they are now in the UMC. The British Methodist Church, for example (a different denomination from the UMC), has faced the same set of issues and has come to a general consensus about them without the polarizing effect these issues have had in the USA. The political climate is notably different in the UK, where it was a Conservative-Party Prime Minister, David Cameron, who paved the way for the legalization of gay marriage. Similarly, issues about homosexuality are not as divisive among United Methodists in Western Europe as they have been in the USA.

B. The Missional Issue of Continuing to Expend Our Energy and Resources Arguing about Issues related to Homosexual Practice

The United Methodist Church has debated these issues for 46 years now, since 1972, when the denomination was only four years old. The debates have become increasingly the center of attention in general conferences and have called for

³ Two prominent United Methodist scholars of St Paul's letters have offered interpretations of the biblical issues related to homosexual practice. Victor Paul Furnish argues that although Paul condemned specific homoerotic acts, Paul did not have anything like a sense of "homosexuality" in the way in which the term is used today: *The Moral Teaching of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, third edition, 2009), 84–88. Richard B. Hays has made a case for a sense in which Paul condemned homosexual relationships *per se*: *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 383–89.

increasing expenditures of time and resources on the part of both liberal and conservative United Methodists. There's a very widespread sense that none of us really wants to continue to expend these levels of energy and resources that distract all of us from our primary mission "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world" (in the 2016 *Discipline*, ¶ 120, p. 93). Rather than continue to debate the issues every four years, this missional issue calls for some more lasting resolution.

C. The Issues of Whether Clergy Should Violate their Vows to Accept the Order and Discipline of the UMC in order to affirm Gay and Lesbian People or to Dissolve the Present UMC.

Clergy in The United Methodist Church (deacons, elders, and bishops) make a vow at ordination in the presence of witnesses that they affirm the following:

Will you be loyal to The United Methodist Church, accepting its order, liturgy, doctrine, and discipline, defending it against all doctrines contrary to God's Holy Word, and committing yourself to be accountable with those serving with you, and to the bishop and those who are appointed to supervise your ministry?⁴

In response to the prohibitions enacted since 1980, some clergy (deacons, elders, and bishops) have violated the *Discipline's* prohibitions given above, arguing that for conscience's sake they must disobey what they take to be immoral prohibitions that were not part of historic and explicit Methodist or EUB practices. Others, even those who question the prohibitions, have elected to keep the denomination's *Discipline* according to the promises made at their ordinations.

Because the two prohibitions named above are tied to chargeable offenses for clergy, those who violate the *Discipline* in regard to these prohibitions are liable to the processes of trial and appeal, at the end of which they can be removed from ministry.

D. The Issue of Whether These Prohibitions should be Globally Binding or Whether There Can Be Any Degree of Local Decision-Making on Them

At this point the two prohibitions in the *Discipline* (the second and third items above and the chargeable offenses related to them) are understood to be globally binding statements for the UMC. That is, they allow for no local decision making on these issues.

⁴ This form is from *Services for the Ordering of Ministry in The United Methodist Church* adopted by the 2004 General conference, p. 22.

Some in the UMC have questioned whether regional or local church bodies could be empowered to make their own decisions on these issues as they do on other issues. For example, annual conferences could be empowered to make their own decisions about whether they could ordain self-avowed practicing homosexual persons, and local congregations could make their own decisions about performing marriages or unions of homosexual persons.

This issue of local decision-making is separate from the larger moral question of the appropriateness of same-sex relationships, though it is closely related to this issue. If folks take the prohibitions against homosexual activity to be absolutely necessary for Christian unity, on the level of the teachings in our Articles of Religion, Confession of Faith, and the General Rules, then it makes sense that they should be taken as globally binding as an expression of the unity of the whole denomination throughout the world.

But because homosexual practice is not explicitly mentioned in our constitutionally-protected doctrinal standards—the Articles, the Confession, and the General Rules—and these prohibitions were not made explicit until 1980 and beyond, others maintain that they should not be globally imposed and that there should be some provision for regional and local autonomy on these issues.

Proposals for a Way Forward

The Commission on a Way Forward appointed by the UMC Council of Bishops after the 2016 general conference presented its report to the Council of Bishops in May 2018. It was released in the official languages of the general conference in June. Although the bishops originally determined to approve only the One Church Plan (see below) to send to the general conference, their authority to send legislation to the General Conference was challenged, and they rescinded that decision and instead are sending the entire report to the general conference.⁵ They have also sent the entire report to the denomination's Judicial Council for a review of all the proposals and, in particular, which proposals would require constitutional changes that in the UMC *Discipline* are much more difficult to adopt than simple legislation. Constitutional changes would require a two-thirds majority of the general conference followed by a two-thirds majority of the aggregate of all voting delegates of UMC annual conferences. I will briefly describe here the three plans offered by the Commission on a Way Forward and some further proposals including the so-called "Simple Plan."

⁵ The constitutionality of bishops presenting legislation to a general conference was challenged in an article by William B. Lawrence and Sally Curtis AsKew, "Constitutional Methodism in Crisis: Historical and Operational Perspectives on Divisions Threatening United Methodism," in *Methodist Review* 10 (2018): 23-72.

1. *The One Church Plan.*

The One Church Plan is a moderately progressive plan. The essence of this plan would be to allow local decision making on matters about ordinations of gay clergy and about marriages of gay or lesbian people in UMC congregations. To do this, the general conference would rescind the present universally restrictive language about homosexual practice from the *Discipline*, and then:

- decisions about ordaining gay and lesbian people would be made by each annual conference's clergy session; and
- decisions about whether marriages of same-sex couples could be held in UMC church buildings would be made by each congregation.

Advocates maintain that the One Church Plan has the best chance of holding the denomination together because it does not require anyone to act contrary to their convictions. However, the plan as stated in the Commission's report does not give laity any role in the decision as to whether an annual conference would ordain gay and lesbian clergy, and it has no way out for congregations that might fundamentally disagree with their conference's clergy session's decision about whether to ordain gay and lesbian clergy.

2. *The Connectional Conference Plan*

The Connectional Conference Plan is a moderately conservative plan. This plan would divide the denomination, at least within the United States, into three overlapping "connectional conferences" (a new term) replacing the existing jurisdictional conferences in the USA. These connectional conferences would be organized according to attitudes towards the presently divisive issues regarding homosexual practice:

- a connectional conference consisting of those who take a consistently conservative, traditional view of the issues regarding homosexual practice;
- a connectional conference consisting of those congregations who take a consistently progressive view of the issues regarding homosexual practice; and
- a connectional conference consisting of those congregations that value the unity of their congregations over any particular stances on the issues of homosexual practice.

The Connectional Conference plan acknowledges the reality of fundamental differences over the issues about sexuality and is perhaps the most creative of the plans proposed. To my knowledge it is unique among plans considered by various denominations faced with this issue because it allows a way to remain united while functioning separately on the dividing issues. However, it would require

considerable amendments to the constitution of the UMC that would require a supermajority of general conference delegates and of representatives to the UMC annual conferences to confirm that.

3. The Traditionalist Plan.

The Traditionalist plan, as its name suggests, is a thoroughly conservative plan. The report from the Commission on a Way Forward names and briefly describes the Traditionalist plan, but it does not describe it in detail nor does it give biblical or theological bases for this plan as it does for the others. This plan would keep in place all of the current restrictions against homosexual practice and would add stronger enforcement of the existing restrictions. This would amount to a thorough victory for United Methodist conservatives, allows no room for United Methodists with more progressive views on the sexuality issues, and would almost certainly lead to an immediate separation of more liberal/progressive United Methodists.

4. Other Proposals

A host of other proposals are coming to the general conference of 2019 from individual proposers and groups in the UMC. For example, a proposal called the “Simple Plan” proposed by the United Methodist Queer Clergy Caucus has been sent to the general conference and to the Judicial Council for presentation to the 2019 general conference. This plan would remove all of the current restrictions on homosexual practice with no provision for local choice.⁶ It would thus amount to a thorough victory for more progressive or liberal United Methodists and would allow no room for traditionalists, forcing them into a separate denomination. But that’s just one example of a huge number of proposals that will be coming to called the general conference of 2019.

Some Complicated Scenarios for 2019, 2020, and Beyond

Given these proposals and others that are likely to come to the general conference of 2019, we might begin to think about some complicated outcomes.

- **Failure to Adopt Any Plan in 2019-2020.** It’s entirely possible that the general conferences of 2019 and 2020 will fail to get the appropriate majorities (one-half in some scenarios, two-thirds in others) to adopt any of the proposed Ways Forward. This would be in a sense the worst possible scenario, since it would imply that the continuing divisions and the continuing expenditures of resources over these issues would continue into an undetermined future.

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/notes/united-methodist-queer-clergy-caucus-public-page/a-simple-plan/609302416119407/>

- **Alteration of Current Proposals.** If the general conferences of 2019 and 2020 were to adopt any of the proposals named in the report of the Commission on a Way Forward or any others brought to the general conference, it's very likely that they would be revised, perhaps very significantly revised, by the general conferences themselves.
- **Rescinding of 2019 Decisions by the 2020 General Conference.** The delegates to the 2020 general conference will be a different group than the delegates to the 2019 general conference. The 2019 general conference will be an extension of the 2016 general conference, generally without electing new delegates. But the 2020 general conference will have a newly-elected slate of delegates; indeed, some annual conferences have already elected delegates to the 2020 general conference. Given that the delegation will be different in 2020, it's possible that the 2020 general conference could reject or significantly alter proposals affirmed (especially if they were affirmed by a slim majority) in the 2019 general conference.
- **Divisions Beyond 2019-2020.** If both the general conferences of 2019 and 2020 failed to adopt a plan to move forward, it's likely that some groups would want to secede from the denomination to pursue their own ways. But this scenario might end up as a dangerous game of "chicken" (who leaves first) to determine who would acquire the present congregations, properties, and other assets of the denomination.
- **Coalescence of Groups and Working Out a Plan Beyond 2019-2020.** It's also possible that if the general conferences of 2019 and 2020 failed to adopt a plan to move forward, groups now coalescing (the Wesleyan Covenant Association representing conservatives; Uniting Methodists representing groups favoring local choice and the One Church Plan; other groups who favor a thorough-going liberal solution) will eventually figure a way to allow each other to separate, perhaps with some remaining ties between them (e.g. the pension funds administered by Wespath). They could eventually agree between these groups on constitutional amendments necessary to move forward with an amicable separation. Something like the Connectional Conference plan might still be in play and, short of a more formal relationship like it, dividing groups could have something like a robust full-communion agreement that would allow for transfer of clergy and collaboration in specific missional and outreach areas.

I think it's also worth holding in mind the following especially if there were any formal divisions (including those envisioned in the Connectional Conference plan).

- We would have to negotiate some painful decisions about church properties (for example, camps and other facilities), about relationships between dividing groups and institutions related to the present denominations (like church-related service agencies, colleges, universities, and theological schools), and ecumenical agreements and partnerships.
- Some persons with more progressive views would follow their friends and conference associates into a more conservative dividing group, and vice versa. Hard

decisions would have to be made, but these issues are not and should not be the only issues determining church identification.

- Some will elect to identify with other denominations as a result. Lay members and clergy who have already been on the verge of making a denominational shift will see this as the moment to change. On the other hand, it's possible that new denominational configurations might attract some persons from other denominations.
- Descendants of those dividing about two generations into the future (about fifty years from now) will likely regret the decision to divide and will begin looking for ways to reunite. Considering future generations in this way makes a case for some remaining structures of unity even if they're distasteful to those currently engaged in conflict.
- It's also likely that within fifty years, other issues will overshadow the sexuality issues currently dividing us and these new issues will pose new threats of division. I think that makes a case for finding some ways to divide temporarily from time to time on crucial issues but with remaining structures to facilitate reunion.

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The Organization of The United Methodist Church

Introduction

The United Methodist Church (UMC) was formed in 1968 as a merger of the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church. Its polity reflects traditions of American episcopal Methodism shared in common with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AME Zion) Church, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church. The polity of the UMC was based on the Anglican polity that John Wesley knew as a priest of the Church of England and was modified by the addition of independent structures (such as classes, bands, societies, and the conference of traveling preachers) that developed in the eighteenth-century Methodist movement.

The *Book of Discipline* and the Constitution

The primary document that specifies United Methodist polity is the denomination's *Book of Discipline*, which is revised quadrennially at the church's General Conference (see below). At the beginning of the *Discipline* is a **constitution** that lays out the authorities and responsibilities of church conferences (see below) and restricts the General Conference from altering specific doctrinal statements (the Articles of Religion, the Confession of Faith, and the General Rules) and from altering specific aspects of church life (right to a trial before removing church members or clergy, the institutions of itinerant ministry and superintendency, and the use of funds from the publishing house to support retired clergy). The *Discipline* lays out the structures of Methodist conferences and local congregations, describes procedures for authorization of lay preachers and for the ordination of ordained clergy (deacons or elders), lays out responsibilities of general church agencies, describes provisions for judicial administration through the denomination's **Judicial Council** (which is authorized to interpret the *Discipline*), and lays out procedures for trials by which clergy and church members may be removed.

United Methodist Conferences

The United Methodist Church is governed by a series of church assemblies or judicatory bodies referred to as **conferences** (from John Wesley's assemblies of preachers to “confer” together).

The **General Conference** meets quadrennially and is the highest decision-making body of the denomination. Only the General Conference can speak on behalf of the denomination, and it has the responsibility of revising the denomination's *Discipline* and adopting resolutions that enunciate positions on behalf of the denomination.

Jurisdictional Conferences are assemblies in large regions of the US (there are five jurisdictions) that meet quadrennially to elect bishops and to elect representatives to general church boards and commissions. **Central Conferences** are large-scale regional assemblies outside the United States. They function like jurisdictional conferences in the election of bishops and the nomination of representatives to general church boards and commissions, but they have extensive authority to revise the *Discipline* (and reprint it) to suit the needs of their regions.

Annual Conferences are regional assemblies that would answer to dioceses in Anglican polity or to presbyteries in Presbyterian polity. The annual conference is defined by the *Discipline* as “the basic unit” of The United Methodist Church, and clergy hold their membership in the annual conference rather than in a local congregation. Annual conferences are composed of all ordained clergy in the conference and an equal number of lay members. They deal with issues of the ministerial standing of ordained clergy and issues relevant to the church's ministries in their own areas and they elect delegates to general and jurisdictional (and central) conferences. Meetings of annual conferences also involve worship and sometimes training activities. An **episcopal area** is defined as the area in which a bishop presides and in most cases this is coterminous with a single annual conference. However, in some cases a bishop will preside over more than one annual conference grouped together in an episcopal area. Annual conferences are divided into smaller **districts**, each presided over by a **district superintendent**.

Local Congregations

A local congregation is governed by a **church council** whose work is to oversee the ministries of the congregation. The church council may develop smaller committees, task forces or work areas to address specific areas of ministry. A **lay leader** is designated annually as the lay representative for the congregation. The congregation designates **trustees** annually who have responsibility for church property. United Methodist congregations hold their property in trust for The United Methodist Church, and a congregation is not allowed to leave the denomination and retain its property without the approval of annual conference including the bishop and district superintendents. The congregation holds annually either a **charge conference** (consisting of church council members and other officials) or a **church conference** (in which all professed church members can participate), presided over by the district superintendent.

Bishops and the Council of Bishops

United Methodist bishops are consecrated to exercise superintendency (oversight) over the church in their episcopal areas. They represent the continuity of teaching in the church, and perform ordinations of deacons and elders. The bishops of the denomination meet together as the **Council of Bishops** and are authorized to speak and negotiate on behalf of the denomination on specific matters defined by the *Discipline*. They act together to give executive leadership for the denomination between general conferences.

General Church Boards and Agencies

The UMC has a number of general (denominational) **boards** and commissions composed of lay and clergy representatives and **agencies** with full-time professional staff designated to address specific areas of the denomination's ministries. The **Connectional Table** (established in 2004) serves to coordinate ministries in these boards and agencies. The general boards and commissions are as follows: the General Board of **Church and Society**, the General Board of **Discipleship**, the General Board of **Global Ministries**, the General Board of **Higher Education and Ministry**, the General Commission on **Religion and Race**, the General Commission on the **Status and Role of Women**, and the General Commission on **United Methodist Men**. The denomination's General Council on **Finance and Administration** oversees the financial administration of the denomination, and the United Methodist **Publishing House**, the General Commission on **Communications**, the General Commission on **Archives and History**, and the General Board of **Pension and Health Benefits** (now rebranded as Wespath) are service agencies of the denomination.

Appointment of Clergy

A distinctive feature of the polity of American episcopal Methodist churches (UMC, AME, AME Zion, and CME) is that clergy are appointed by bishops in consultation with district superintendents. (In the AME, AME Zion, and CME churches, these are referred to as “presiding elders.”) In the UMC, the bishop and his or her “cabinet” of superintendents are required to consult with a congregation's **pastor-parish relations committee** (or **staff-parish relations committee** in larger congregations) and with clergy themselves in matters of clergy appointments. This distinctive mode of clergy appointment is referred to historically as **itinerancy** (or “itinerant ministry”) and is an aspect of United Methodist life protected by the constitution of the denomination.

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