

The schism among Methodists / Another large Protestant church has paid the price for pushing the gender agenda

Slovak Methodists have also left the United Methodist Church. They disagree with the denial of the biblical teaching on sexuality.



Illustration photo: facebook.com/GlobalMethodism

The Christian Reformed Church is a small denomination by American standards. Approximately 200 thousand believers in the United States and Canada are affiliated with the church, which is based on the Calvinist tradition.

Like many other churches in the West, it began several decades ago to take a welcoming approach to homosexual relationships, with practicing homosexuals becoming deacons in some congregations. In particular, the LGBT community has built a strong base at Calvin University in Grand Rapids (Michigan), the main academic institution of American Calvinists.

That something was afoot in the church was indicated as early as 2016, when the synod, the church's highest body, approved the formation of a study group to examine the biblical teaching on sexuality.

After six years, the process was completed with this year's synod, which in June approved a binding document on human sexuality that condemns as immoral acts premarital and extramarital sex, polyamory, pornography and homosexual intercourse.

Of the 190 synod participants, 125 delegates voted in favor of the document, while 53 voted against it.

“The church must warn its members that those who refuse to repent of these sins – as well as idolatry, greed and other similar sins – will not be heirs of the kingdom of God,” says Christianity Today, quoting from the report.

Spiritual awakening

There are several reasons why American Calvinists have decided to shift into reverse gear. “Those who argued at synod for acceptance and inclusion of the homosexual lifestyle often had gray hair and wrinkles. Many of those who advocated for biblical sexuality were visibly younger,” Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, editor of the Gospel Coalition website, wrote in her analysis.

In addition to the fact that a new conservative generation has grown up in the Christian Reformed Church, the fact that church boards have expanded to include numerous ethnic minorities has also played an important role. Whereas a quarter-century ago their proportion was about five percent, today, Hispanics, Asians, and African Americans make up nearly a quarter of the community.

“The Old Testament prohibits adultery, incest and same-sex sex, making it clear that only sexual activity within marriage is acceptable to God,” the Hispanic Pastors Association said in a statement. The Korean Council of Pastors expressed a similar sentiment.

Not to be overlooked, according to Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, is the spiritual awakening in the church: “For the first time in twenty years, the proportion of believers who are praying privately, holding family devotions, reading the Bible daily, and developing personal devotions has begun to increase. (...) This correlation makes sense to me. The correlation between personal devotion and the inclination toward traditional marriage is well documented. The implication is that people who pray, read the Bible, and go to church favor biblical sexuality.”

Division among Methodists

What is happening in the American Christian Reformed Church is not unique. “Official support for liberal teachings on sexuality has led some conservatives in the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the Episcopal Church to form new denominations or join existing churches,” says Mark Tooley, director of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, who says thousands of conservative congregations with hundreds of thousands of members are gradually leaving.

Particularly closely watched is the situation in the United Methodist Church, which has seven million members in the United States and is the third largest Christian denomination after the Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention.

The United Methodist Church is rooted in the spiritual tradition of John Wesley, the leader of the revivalist movement in the Church of England in the 18th century. From England, this stream made its way to the United States and from there to the rest of the world. Today, 80 million believers belong to the Methodist movement, with the

United Methodist Church being the largest with 13 million members, up to half of whom live on the African continent.

“Unlike most mainline Protestant denominations, the Methodists have never officially liberalized their teachings on sexuality. On the contrary, they affirmed it by a majority vote of 53 percent at their last General Conference in 2019,” Mark Tooley reports.

While the stumbling block last time was women's episcopal ordination, at this year's Lambeth Conference it was homosexuality.

Yet today the United Methodist Church is being shaken to its foundations – for on 1 May this year a new Global Methodist Church was formed, into which conservative believers are gradually moving.

This creates a paradoxical situation where the church is not being abandoned by the minority progressive camp, but by the majority conservative camp. The reasons, according to Tooley, are prosaic.

The traditional biblical teaching on sexuality was affirmed at General Conference three years ago largely because of the voices of the non-American, mainly African delegates, while all the leadership positions in the mainline, that is, the American, part of the church are held by progressives who have long refused to respect the views of the majority.

The ordination of the first lesbian bishop, Karen Oliveto, in 2016 is a case in point, even though current norms do not allow it.

However, the situation is not as clear-cut as it might seem at first glance. Far from all conservative congregations are transitioning to the new Global Methodist Church. Some have decided to go their own way, others are joining other existing denominations, and there are quite a few that have decided to remain in The United Methodist Church in the hope that they can revive it from within.

But there is another important aspect – the economic one. Jay Therrell, president of the Wesleyan Covenant Association, which assists congregations in leaving the United Methodist Church for the Global Methodist Church, pointed out in a response to the AP that in many cases the parent church makes unrealistic financial demands on departing congregations. And those often escalate into lawsuits.

Slovak Methodists have also left

What is happening in the Methodist movement also directly affects Slovakia, where the Evangelical Methodist Church is active. It is one of the 18 officially registered churches and religious societies, with seven parishes and three thousand believers registered in the last census.

In recent weeks, all the congregations voted and approved to leave the United Methodist Church for the Global United Methodist Church, which was unanimously approved at the district conference in mid-October.

In the days that followed, Keith Boyette, coordinator of the Global United Methodist Church, arrived to lead it through a period of transition culminating in a General

Conference in 2024 or 2025. Only then will it become definite how many congregations and members the new church actually has.



Samuel Javornický and Gabriella Kopas. Photo: Postoj/Martin Buzna, personal archive of G. K.

“We had reached a point where the scissors of opinions had opened up so much that living under one Methodist roof was no longer sustainable,” Gabriella Kopas, pastor of the Elim Methodist congregation in Bratislava, Slovakia, offers a domestic perspective.

“The root of the problem is not the teaching on human sexuality itself, that's just one symptom. The real crux is the differences in how we view God's Word – whether we are merely stewards of God's message or whether we can adapt it to fit current cultural and social circumstances,” Kopas reflects.

Samuel Javornický from Dolný Kubín, who was one of the European delegates to the Wesleyan Covenant Association meeting in Indianapolis this summer, also has first-hand experience of what is happening in the American Methodist movement.

“Progressive activism can be felt especially on the part of the bishops, who are pushing the gender agenda into the lower structures. I have spoken with several pastors whose congregations want to move to the Global Methodist Church but are being prevented from doing so by various property and financial demands from the United Methodist Church,” Javornický recalls.

Telling, he says, is the case of Filipino Methodists, who, while holding traditional biblical teachings, are economically dependent on the U.S. headquarters that funds the operation of their schools and hospitals. If they decided to switch to the Global Methodist Church, they would probably lose everything.

However, a similar problem is being faced by the countries in our region, which belong to the so-called Episcopal Area of Central and Southern Europe, led by the Bishop based in Zurich.

“So far, only Bulgaria and Croatia have left the United Methodist Church in Europe, apart from Slovakia. The Romanians are also on the way out, but they are heavily dependent financially on the episcopal office in Switzerland, so they have to find a way. It remains to be seen in the coming months whether others will join,” Javornický describes the current situation.

The financial contribution from the state, which enables the Evangelical Methodist Church to be economically independent from Zurich, has thus proved to be a great advantage in this case.

“If we hadn't split up, we would have harmed the Lord's church more because of internal disputes and disorder than when we decided to leave. Even the apostle Paul and Barnabas disagreed on certain things, so that each went in his own direction. We want to continue to work faithfully in God's work,” concludes preacher Gabriella Kopas.