

Do No Harm, Do Good, and Stay in Love with God How Wesley's General Rules Guide the OK Annual Conference in these Troubling Times

Session 3

Human Sexuality and the United Methodist Church

In 1972, the first language about homosexuality was included in *The Book of Discipline of the UMC*. And at every General Conference gathering since then, challenges and amendments have been made which have led to additions to our *Book of Discipline* prohibiting same gender weddings or unions and ordination of self-avowed, practicing homosexual persons. Throughout those 50 years, strident calls to remove those restrictions have come to the General Conference over and over again since 1972.

One side expresses the perspective that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, and as such, no self-avowed, practicing homosexuals should be ordained. No UM clergy should perform weddings or unions for same gender couples, and no UMCs should allow weddings or unions of same gender couples in their buildings.

Another side, expresses the perspective that LGBTQ persons are created as they are and are beloved children of God, and as such should be allowed to be ordained regardless of sexual orientation. Further, that weddings of same-gender couples should be officiated by the clergy and those weddings should be allowed to be held in UMCs.

Both sides of this debate base their beliefs in their deeply held faith in God and their understanding of scripture. Both sides express love and concern for all persons including those that do not identify as heterosexual. And both sides are earnestly seeking to do the will of God and believe fervently that the other side is wrong.

But as in many things, there are NOT only 2 sides to this story. There are also a very large number of faithful UMs who find themselves somewhere in the middle... able to share life together in their church families and in the UMC with people whose perspectives on this and other questions of right belief and action are different. While some UMCs would choose not to hold same gender weddings in their facilities... others would welcome the opportunity to do so. And while some UMs may feel that the sexual orientation of the clergy should not be considered when determining the authenticity of their call from God and preparation for ordained ministry; others would be reticent to receive a pastor that is not heterosexual. And among these sometimes called "centrist" UMs, there is a desire that we find ways to respect and honor these differences between us while remaining together in the UMC. This perspective is often referred to as the "Big Tent" UMC. The difficulty is that, since 1972, for 50 years we have not yet agreed upon a way to remain together under that "Big Tent".

These centrist UMs are also people with deep and earnest faith in God and they too study the scripture. While they may lean toward the perspective of one or the other sides on issues related to human sexuality and express love and concern for all persons including those that do not identify as heterosexual; they are open to the possibility of God's will including a diversity of viewpoints on these matters. Centrist UMs are also sincerely seeking to do the will of God and believe fervently that there is room in the UMC for our differences.

After many years of discord, the 2016 General Conference - assigned the Council of Bishops to lead the UMC to a resolution on our division regarding matters of human sexuality. The Council of Bishops appointed a

diverse and representative group called “The Commission on the Way Forward” to produce recommendations. The Commission on the Way Forward offered the Council of Bishops three options:

The One Church Plan

The Connectional Conference Plan

and The Traditional Plan.

The Council of Bishops endorsed The One Church Plan however; all 3 options were presented for consideration by a **Special Called Session of the General Conference in 2019** which they called in order to assist the UMC in addressing our division regarding matters of human sexuality. The Traditional Plan passed by a 53%-47% margin which *did not* result in solving our deep divisions. In fact, many of UMs came to accept that on these issues we seem to be unable to reconcile our differences. Because of that apparent reality; in consideration for those who would want to separate from the UMC because they disagree with the position of the church on human sexuality, the 2019 General Conference added Par. 2553 to the *Book of Discipline* to provide for a limited time (through 2023) for congregations wishing to disaffiliate from the UMC to do so with most of their assets and property if necessary requirements were fulfilled .

However; since the Traditional Plan passed and 47% of the General Conference voted against it; it soon became clear that that there were additional issues for churches that *were* able to support those restrictions and some of them also desired a way to disaffiliate from the UMC with most of their assets and property. Some of those concerns are:

- Some believe that our division indicates a trend toward the UMC becoming more open to persons that are not heterosexual.
- Some Annual Conferences, Jurisdictions, Bishops, and Boards of Ordained Ministry have chosen not to fully follow *The Book of Discipline* particularly regarding restrictions on human sexuality. Examples are:
 - The election and consecration of a lesbian Bishop
 - The approval, ordination, and appointments of LGBTQ persons in some Annual Conferences
 - Clergy officiating and UM congregations and ministries holding same gender weddings without Disciplinary consequences.
- And there have been reports of a very small number of UM clergy that have disputed some basic doctrines of Christianity and the UMC.

In an effort to broaden the opportunity for disaffiliation with assets to include those who *are in* agreement with *The Book of Discipline* on human sexuality; in **January of 2020** a theologically diverse ad hoc group that included 9 bishops and members of conservative, centrist, and progressive groups got together with a mediator and created a proposal that would allow congregations *and* conferences desiring to separate from the UMC to do so by what has been called a “graceful exit” allowing them to go with property that would otherwise remain with the UMC. They created “**The Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation**” for consideration by what was then the upcoming 2020 General Conference. “The Protocol” (as it came to be called) would allow congregations *and* conferences to leave the UMC without being in disagreement with the current laws of the UMC on human sexuality.

What happened?

In **March of 2020** – The World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 outbreak a pandemic.

In addition to the many devastating losses brought on by the pandemic; the meeting of the 2020 General Conference was postponed till 2021 and again until 2022.

General Conference is a gathering every four years of United Methodists from around the world. It is normally challenging to get all the elected delegates together in one place but it became even more difficult to accomplish when dealing with vaccination availability and requirements as well as visas for international delegates.

And the postponed 2020 General Conference scheduled to happen in 2022 was either postponed *or* cancelled until 2024. The Judicial Council will determine which it is. The reason there is a question is that under normal conditions the UMC would have had a General Conference in 2020 and 2024 so the Judicial Council must determine if when we meet in 2024, we are holding the postponed 2020 General Conference or if it is no longer postponed but canceled and we are simply holding the 2024 General Conference.

What difference does that make? Well, if we hold the postponed 2020 General Conference the delegates elected to serve for that meeting will do so. If the 2020 General Conference is cancelled, new delegates will be elected to serve at the 2024 General Conference.

In May of 2022 there was another development. – If you remember, “The Protocol of Reconciliation & Grace Through Separation” (which has not yet been voted on by a GC) recommended that a “graceful exit” be provided not only to individual congregations but also to entire annual conferences. The Judicial Council was asked to rule on whether US annual conferences could or could not vote for all of the churches, ministries, and clergy in their conference to leave the UMC and join another denomination and the Judicial Council ruled that current church law does not allow for US annual conferences to leave the denomination.

And in February of 2022 the Judicial Council ruled that the “reasons of conscience” behind a church’s decision to disaffiliate using Par. 2553 need not be questioned by the Trustees of an annual conference. This decision made it possible for congregations that support the current position of the *Book of Discipline* as well as those who do not to disaffiliate from the UMC under Par. 2553 which states:

“Because of the current deep conflict within The United Methodist Church around issues of human sexuality, a local church shall have a limited right, under the provisions of this paragraph, to disaffiliate from the denomination for reasons of conscience regarding a change in the requirements and provisions of the Book of Discipline related to the practice of homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals as resolved and adopted by the 2019 General Conference, or the actions or inactions of its annual conference related to these issues.”

What does this mean right now?

- **The 2016 *Book of Discipline*** (as amended in 2019 by The Traditional Plan) is still authoritative and will be until the General Conference in 2024.
- And, while it is true that some annual conferences have not followed the *Book of Discipline*; in the OK Annual Conference we do and we will.
- Also, possible legislation like “The Protocol” and anticipated recommendations from Wespath (which has oversight over the pension program of the UMC) to provide ways for liabilities to be transferred to a new entity have not been before a General Conference to be voted on and are therefore aspirational. The OK Annual Conference will follow the current *Book of Discipline*.

- Some hope that another Par. 2548.2 will be available to congregations wishing to disaffiliate from the UMC. At this time the Judicial Council is considering that possibility and until and if they approve its use; the option available for disaffiliation remains Par. 2553.

So what are our options now?

- **Most of our UM Congregations and Clergy in OK will remain UM.** Our conference has a long and faithful history of congregations and clergy that have reflected conservative, centrist, and progressive views and we expect to continue to be welcoming to a wide variety of earnest disciples of Jesus.
- **Wait for the 2024 General Conference** – Congregations considering disaffiliation and those who are in support of the current *Book of Discipline* but have concerns that there may be future changes that they cannot support, may benefit from simply waiting to learn about decisions made by the General Conference in 2024. Wespath, which has oversight over the pension program of the UMC, will have proposed legislation that may smooth the path to addressing liabilities and it is expected that proponents of “The Protocol” may continue to pursue the intention of the original proposal.
- **Disaffiliate using Par. 2553 which expires Dec. 31, 2023.** In the OK Annual Conference our Trustees have produced a “Disaffiliation Agreement” that meets the criteria of Par. 2553. The Office of Transitional Ministries is ready to assist any congregation that discerns that they should disaffiliate.

There are many important considerations regarding disaffiliation.

- **Congregations and Clergy** – make decisions separately. Pastors may remain UM while the church they serve separates and visa versa.
The only way a United Methodist pastor can remain with a disaffiliating church is to withdraw from the UMC following the process outlined in the *Book of Discipline* Par. 360. Another denomination may or may not recognize their ordination or license.
If a church disaffiliates and the pastor remains UM, one of two things will happen. If the pastor is an elder in full connection, the Bishop will offer him or her another appointment. If the pastor is a local pastor, the Bishop will try to find a place of service for them in the UMC but unlike elders, they are not guaranteed an appointment. In the OK Annual Conference, we highly value our full and part-time local pastors and have many opportunities for them to serve.
- **Clergy will NOT** – lose their pension if they choose to leave the UMC. It will be structured differently by Wespath but it is an earned benefit that cannot be taken away.
- **Disaffiliating congregations** need to decide whether they will join another denomination or become independent and take appropriate steps associated with that decision. Denominations have approval processes. Independent churches must take legal steps normally addressed by denominations.
- Congregations and individuals considering leaving the UMC should be certain that they are fully aware of the core beliefs and structure of the UMC and the denomination or church they are contemplating joining.

- **Connectional Expectations -**

If you are considering becoming a part of another denomination, what support can your church expect and what will be expected of your church?

Shared ministries – What shared ministries can you support and be a part of? One of the great things about the UMC is that we work together to do God’s work in a variety of ways. Just here in OK you share in the work done by the Circle of Care, Project Transformation, our Camps, and our Office of Mission that sends teams of Christian missionaries all over the world.)

What about financial support? Our shared apportionment giving makes many things possible including grants for new ministries, revitalizing and planting new churches, and salary support for struggling congregations.

And as a connectional church we participate as a group in many benefits. As UM churches, our congregations participate in the tax-exempt status of the UMC as well as group benefits such as significantly diminished costs for workers comp coverage. We work together to establish safety measures for all of our churches and ministries and contract for wide ranging background checks to protect children, youth, and vulnerable adults in our facilities. In the recent past, we have been made very aware of the legal assistance of our annual conferences as well as the whole UMC as together we navigated the deep and sorrowful concerns of lawsuits related to abuses that occurred in the Boy Scouts of America.

Also, be sure to consider Christian Education curriculum & programming

Today, there are a wide variety of options for Christian Education. Many UMCs have relied upon materials provided by Cokesbury and the General Board of Discipleship. As always, it will be important that the curriculum used in your church reflect its core beliefs and practices.

- And finally, be certain to take very seriously

Clergy: Ordination, Licensing, Supervision, and Support

What will be the process for the credentialing of your clergy?

What educational requirements must they meet?

Will they be required to participate in continuing education and spiritual growth?

And what will happen when your church experiences a pastoral transition? One of the much loved and sometimes maligned practices of United Methodism is our “sent” ministry. If you are considering becoming independent or a part of another denomination; what will happen to your church in a time of pastoral transition?

These are just some of many very important considerations that every church considering leaving the UMC should be aware of and address.

As we close Session 3 we invite you to take just a few moments to view a video created in 2018 for the 50th Anniversary of the UMC. We hope this educational program has been a blessing to you and your congregation. For more information please contact: Rev. Tish Malloy, Director of Transitional Ministries at tmalloy@okumc.org or 405.530.2027.

WE STILL BELIEVE: Celebrating 50 Years of The United Methodist Church (4:44 minutes)

At this point, stop the video for discussion. This is the end of Session 3 and concludes

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Discussion

1. Clearly, we are living in complex and troubling times in the UMC. In this video we heard described 3 sides represented by UMs regarding human sexuality and the church. All too simply put, there are those who support restrictions, those who oppose restrictions, and persons who find themselves somewhere in the middle on these issues. In a graceful manner, share where you find yourself and why?
2. Have a scribe take notes in your group. If there are questions not answered in this program, please email them to tmalloy@okumc.org to receive a response.
3. The UMC is a very large, global, and diverse church. What brought you joy when you viewed the video: "WE STILL BELIEVE: Celebrating 50 Years of The United Methodist Church"? What brings you joy about your local church?