

We Ain't Goin' to Splitsville

(During announcements: A special Session of the General Conference of the UMC meets this February, called for one purpose: to vote on “A Way Forward” concerning some of the wording in our church Discipline regarding homosexuality. No one asked me to speak on this. I’m preaching on it this morning because I didn’t want you to be caught by surprise, and wanted an opportunity to tell you exactly what they will vote on and exactly how I see it.)

We United Methodists have three branches of governance just like our country.

1. EXECUTIVE--- Council of Bishops
2. LEGISLATIVE --- General Conference
3. JUDICIAL --- Judicial Council

The Council of Bishops asked the General Conference to form a two year commission called “A Way Forward.” Earlier this year the commission created three options. The Council of Bishops then sent the three options to the Judicial Council to rule on their constitutionality.¹ Yes, we have a constitution.²

Will one of these options pass in February? That is the question.

Many are afraid that the UMC will go to Splitsville over this, just like the Episcopalians, but I am not afraid, and this morning I want to tell you why.

Let me remind you who United Methodists are, and why we will survive this, and why we will thrive because of this. *First*, hey, we’ve split before:

METHODISM SPLIT # ONE: WHAT IF A PASTOR DOESN'T LIKE THE CHURCH HE'S APPOINTED TO?

In 1784, Methodists decided to call themselves the Methodist Episcopal Church. During its first eight years, some pastors didn’t like it that the superintendents had the authority to appoint preachers to churches without their having any say-so. At the 1792 General Conference there was a motion to allow unhappy preachers to appeal their appointments. When the motion failed, a few pastors pulled out and formed the Republican Methodist Church (later the Christian Church).³ How long did it take to have our first splinter group? Eight years.

METHODISM SPLIT # TWO: GOODBYE, CHURCH OF ENGLAND

Methodism began in England as an evangelical movement within the Anglican Church, also called the Church of England. This movement was begun by an Anglican Priest named John Wesley. His movement spread to the United States in a big way with Wesley’s blessing. But disputes arose about the status of the travelling preachers. They weren’t Oxford educated, ordained, Anglican Priests, for sure. And if they weren’t priests, could they administer the sacraments of communion and baptism?

John Wesley, wanting to fix this but reluctant to “ordain” anyone and get in trouble with the Church of England, “empowered” Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey as “elders,” sending them and some other preachers over here to America to help. Then he “empowered” Thomas

Coke, an Anglican Priest like Wesley, to go as “superintendent” of the American church, instructing him to “empower” Francis Asbury as his “co-superintendent” when he got there. Asbury was “empowered” on Christmas Day, 1784 in Baltimore, as were a dozen American Methodist circuit riders (preachers on horseback riding on a circuit of several churches to serve communion and baptize). Wesley’s empowering of superintendents was considered by Americans to be, for all practical purposes, Wesley’s *ordination* of them as *bishops*. The empowered circuit riders were considered *ordained pastors*. John Wesley never sanctioned American Methodism’s split from the Church of England, but after his death in 1791, it was natural and inevitable. In 1795, it became official. As our thirteen colonies had declared their independence from England, so the Methodist Episcopal Church in America declared its independence from the Church of England.

METHODISM SPLIT # THREE: MULTI-SPLINTERING OVER SLAVERY

John Wesley called slavery the "sum of all villainies." The last letter he ever wrote was to anti-slavery crusader William Wilberforce, urging him to “Go on, in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.”⁴ Wesley put it in his rule book that Methodists couldn’t buy, sell, or own slaves.⁵ The American Methodists adopted Wesley’s antislavery rule, but over the years the Methodist Episcopal Church in America had grown lax. Then the antislavery movement kicked in and slavery was debated vigorously at the General Conferences of 1836. It was hot, and when the bishops were afraid to take a firm stand, several pastors in New England withdrew to form the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, among them the Rev. Orange Scott who said it would be a sin for them to remain in a church that seemed so intent on betraying its antislavery heritage.⁶

At the very same time, however, the Methodist Episcopal Church was cracking down on pastors with slaves—Rev. Francis Harding of Baltimore for one. He appealed his suspension and lost at the 1844 General Conference. Then, for his wife owning slaves, Bishop James O. Andrew of Georgia was ordered to *suspend his exercise of episcopal functions*. That was the last straw for the pro-slavery crowd. Within days, almost all of the delegates from major slave-holding states formed a Plan of Separation, and in 1845 formed the Methodist Episcopal Church, *South*. Fifteen years before southern states seceded from the Union to form the Confederate States of America, southern Methodists seceded from Methodists in the north—fractured over slavery.

Then the southerners split. Southern Methodists who were antislavery left the Methodist Episcopal Church, South to found in 1843 The Wesleyan Church of America. In 1860 some founded the Free Methodist Church and began working for the abolition of slavery.

What about African Americans? Slave or free, they had been welcomed in the earliest Methodist Societies. One of them, a 17-year-old slave from Delaware named Richard Allen, joined them in 1777. A Methodist pastor helped him buy his freedom, he became a Methodist lay preacher, and Allen attended the famous Christmas Conference when Francis Asbury was “ordained.” Asbury himself ordained Rev. Allen in 1799 as the first ordained black minister in America. But because of increasing segregation in the church, some began forming their own Methodist groups. Allen affiliated with a number of these over the years, and in 1816 Rev. Richard Allen established the

African Methodist Episcopal Church (the AME Church), the first independent black denomination in America.

After the Civil War, in 1870 the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, “generously” formed a separate denomination for its black members, calling it the *Colored* Methodist Episcopal Church (the CME Church, now the *Christian* Methodist Episcopal Church).

METHODISM SPLIT # FOUR: HOLINESS

Back in 1852 in Georgia, some Methodists withdrew to form the Congregational Methodist denomination, partly because they didn’t like Methodist Episcopal bishops appointing their pastors, but mostly because they were a part of the larger holiness movement happening within Methodism. John Wesley’s theology of *Christian perfection* or *entire sanctification* came to mean that you could live entirely without sin, so there came a rush to holy living—usually meaning plain clothing, clean language, no drinking, and the like. The Methodist leaders and others were alarmed by the movement’s legalist theological direction. Rampant revivalism and charismatic traveling evangelists were viewed as dangerous to the flock by the leadership. It triggered bitter divisions in Methodism stretching into the 20th century, when the Church of the Nazarene formed in 1908. In the 1920s, the Methodist Protestant Church was created for similar reasons. Strange, isn’t it, that we could splinter over what was meant by the word *holy*?

METHODISMS SPLIT # FIVE: RACE

At the 1939 “Uniting Conference,” our two breakaways came home. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South and the Methodist Protestant Church reunited with the Methodist Episcopal Church, North to form *The Methodist Church*, but race was a major sticking point as they negotiated this merger. There was growing sympathy for blacks under segregation, and some regarded such sympathies as too much modernization. The unification worked, but there was a walkout. The Mississippi delegation of the Methodist Protestant Church withdrew from the proceedings, and most of them reorganized to continue on, retaining the title, Methodist Protestant Church; although small in number, they carry on today. Other Mississippi walkouts formed a new denomination: The Fellowship of Fundamental Bible Churches. In 1940 the Southern Methodist and in 1946 the Evangelical Methodist Churches formed.

AFTER ALL THAT, HOW DID WE BECOME TODAY’S UMC?

The Evangelical United Brethren (Wesleyans with German immigrant roots) and the Methodist Church united in 1968 to form the United Methodist Church. This year is our 50th birthday.

As you may be aware, *the* most persistent issue in our church for at least 25 years has been our Discipline’s language about homosexuality. It’s hotly debated every four years at General Conference with the nation’s media cameras on. Expensive and embarrassing church trials are nonstop as some clergy risk performing gay marriages; they are being brought up on charges; and some end up losing their pastoral orders. This is not going away.

A WAY FORWARD

Recap: A diverse 32-member “Commission on a Way Forward” was formed to design, well, *a way forward*. They did not agree and they did not give up. No one got everything they wanted. The result? They produced not one, but three models.⁷

WHAT ARE THESE THREE MODELS?

1. **The One-Church Model** (Change the UM Discipline’s language about homosexuality.)
2. **Three Connectional Conferences Model** (Dismantle regional jurisdictions and replace them with Progressive, Centrist, and Traditional Branches, with each Annual Conference then voting on which Branch it will join.)
3. **Traditionalist Model** (No change in the Discipline’s language about homosexuality.)

The One-Church Model is the one recommended now by the Bishops, which means that it is the model that will be voted on in February. If it does not pass, I suspect there will come a motion concerning one of the other models.

WHAT DOES THE ONE-CHURCH MODEL PROPOSE SPECIFICALLY?

1. Because the controversial words in our Discipline, that the practice of homosexuality is “incompatible with Christian teaching,” has been experienced as hurtful by gay persons and as alienating by younger generations, those words would be removed.
2. For the same reasons, the Discipline’s current words prohibiting the ordination of “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” would be removed *with the understanding that* our clergy—through their normal Board of Ordained Ministry process—would continue to have the authority to discern who is fit and fruitful for clergy service in their annual conference.
3. Because the expensive and unending trials against clergy for performing same-sex marriages are damaging to individuals and to our public witness, the words in our Discipline prohibiting pastors from officiating homosexual unions would be removed *with the understanding that* each individual clergy may decide which weddings to officiate or not officiate.

That’s it. If the One-Church Model passes at the Special Session of the General Conference in February, you may be asking yourself: *What will change for us—for me as your pastor and for you, Owl Rock UMC?* Note that “No” is the correct answer to all of the following questions:

- Will anyone force me to officiate a same-sex marriage or any marriage? No.
- Will anyone force Owl Rock’s Administrative Council to change church policy to specifically allow same sex weddings in this sanctuary? No.
- Will anyone force Owl Rock to host same sex marriages or any marriage? No.
- Will Owl Rock at any time in the future be forced to receive as its pastor someone who is from the LGBTQ community? No.

I think I know you well enough to say that some people in this room will be pretty happy if this passes, because you sympathize with a group of people who feel hurt and marginalized by the language in our church's Discipline. And that's good. There is a home for you in the United Methodist Church. And if this passes, some of you will not be very happy because of traditional, theological principles rooted in your interpretation of scriptures on this matter. And that's good. There is room for you in the United Methodist Church.

- To the ones of you who will be happy, allow me to remind you that in this room you have brothers and sisters whom you love who may not join you in that.
- To the ones of you who will not be happy, allow me to remind you that in this room you have brothers and sisters whom you love who may not join you in that.
- To all of you, allow me to remind you that brothers and sisters don't always agree, but disagreement cannot change that we are brothers and sisters. In our family we honor one another's right to disagree and to choose.

Any one of us may disagree with the General Conference's decision to change the wording in our Discipline, should that happen, but that change takes away no one's right to their opinion, no one's right to disagree, no one's right to their principles, and no one's right to choose---not the pastors or the laity. This is a big tent; there is plenty of room in here for diversity, and respect for that diversity.

HOW BIG IS OUR TENT?

Look at who we are. All of the following persons are proud and practicing United Methodists (enlarged and held up one at a time):



- Former President George W. and Laura Bush --- proud and practicing United Methodists.
- Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton --- a proud and practicing United Methodist.
- Former Attorney General Jeff Sessions --- a proud and practicing United Methodist.
- Senator Elizabeth Warren --- a proud and practicing United Methodist.
- Beyoncé with her pastor at St. John's UMC, Houston --- a proud and practicing United Methodist.
- Former Georgia Senator Max Cleland --- a proud and practicing United Methodist.

THIS IS WHO WE ARE!

We are the most diverse body of believers on this planet---diverse in every conceivable way: theologically, politically, socially, ethnically, economically . . .

- We don't believe in monochrome.
- We don't believe in homogenized.
- We don't believe in "group think."

Some see our diversity as division and weakness. But our diversity is evidence of our maturity and strength and stamina. We *are* different, and we endure. We *are* multifaceted, and we are one.

WHY ARE WE LIKE THIS TODAY?

We owe more to John Wesley than we can measure:

- John Wesley said, "Though we may not think alike, may we not all love alike?"
- John Wesley said, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

Some may laugh at us in February, and they may say, *There is nothing "united" in the United Methodist Church today.*

And they may take their cameras and microphones and search out the most polarizing voices among us so they can revel in our division, fan the flames of our disagreement, and even hope for our demise.

But they don't know us very well, do they.

Methodists have endured a great diversity of opinion on many matters within the Church, some so volatile that we were shaken, so shaken at times that we faltered, so faltering at times that we splintered. But we don't break.

We have a track record of getting back up, of reassessing, of repenting, of reconciling, of reuniting, and of re-creating. It's always been what we do and always will be. It's always been who we are and always will be. We're United Methodists, and we will find a way forward together.

¹ The Council of Bishops asked the Judicial Council (JC) to analyze all three models and rule on the constitutionality of each. The JC did that with Models 1 and 3, but not with Model 2. Model 2 remains a viable option, but because it contains within it proposed constitutional amendments, it fell outside the JC's jurisdictional criteria, meaning they could not rule on the constitutionality of a plan that is based on constitutional amendments that have not been passed. They did rule, however, on every detail in Models 1 and 3. Both 1 and 3 had portions that were ruled constitutional and a few portions that were not. With this input from the Judicial Council, the Way Forward Commission with the members of the General Conference will work to fix the unconstitutional portions. You may read the JC's rulings in full at [http://cdnfiles.umc.org/Website_Properties/JCD_1366_\(Docket_No._1018-12\).pdf](http://cdnfiles.umc.org/Website_Properties/JCD_1366_(Docket_No._1018-12).pdf)

² The United Methodist Book of Discipline 2016. *The Constitution*. Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, p. 25. <https://www.cokesbury.com/forms/DynamicContent.aspx?id=87&pageid=920#9568>

³ Richey, Russell E.; Rowe, Kenneth E.; Schmidt, Jean Miller (2010). *American Methodism: A Compact History*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, p.35.

⁴ The People of the United Methodist Church, *Timeline: Methodism in Black and White*, first appeared in *New World Outlook*, May-June 1992 and was adapted by permission and updated by United Methodist Communications, <http://www.umc.org/resources/timeline-methodism-in-black-and-white>

⁵ Posey, Walter Brownlow, "Influence of Slavery upon the Methodist Church in the Early South and Southwest." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* Vol. 17, No. 4 (March, 1931): p. 530.

⁶ The Wesleyan Church, *Antislavery Roots*, <https://secure.wesleyan.org/229/antislavery-roots>

⁷ The Commission on a Way Forward's final report to the General Conference, submitted July 31, 2018, http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website_Properties/council-of-bishops/news_and_statements/documents/Way_Forward_Report_-_Final_-_ENGLISH.pdf