

UNITED METHODISM: IS SCHISM INEVITABLE?

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"The United Methodist Church is no longer a contemporary North American, mainline, liberal Protestant denomination like the Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, the United Church of Christ, and the like. It is a unique, global, orthodox Methodist denomination."

Advocating METHEXIT, William J. Abrahams, Confessing Movement, SMU

Today's topic--Not simply a theoretical issue, but a pressing reality

1. Issues being debated today will shape the future.
2. During Feb. 2019--a decisive, probably divisive, General Conference meets in St. Louis to determine the future of United Methodism
3. In 2016 a special commission was established by the General Conference to make recommendations to the United Methodist Council on Bishops on how to deal with human sexuality, particularly homosexuality, and maintain the unity of the church. The Commission developed three approaches, and the Bishops are recommending the 2019 special General Conference adopt the "One Church Plan." All of the plans under consideration include "a gracious way of exit for those who feel called to exit from the denomination."

How did we reach this point in our church's life?

1. Methodists in the United States have experienced various schisms or splits over the centuries.
 - A. African-Americans withdrew and formed their own vibrant denominations at various points in response to slavery, racism and segregation.
 - B. Methodism divided basically north and south over slavery.
 - C. In 1939 The Methodist Church was formed from three Methodist denominations; unity was purchased at the price of a great moral compromise
 - * A governance system (polity) was created that included five geographical jurisdictions and one jurisdiction based on race
 - * Primary purpose of these jurisdictions were to elect bishops for their own areas; thus avoiding possibility of a southern bishop being assigned to the north, and vice versa. Each jurisdiction elected, consecrated, and assigned their own bishops according to their geographical area, or in the case of the Central Jurisdiction for African-American churches across the country.
 - D. In 1968 The United Methodist Church was created, as a union between the The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church.

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* The jurisdictional system of governance was retained, but the Central Jurisdiction based on race was abolished and absorbed within existing geographical jurisdictions. Bishops continued to be elected by jurisdictions, not by the whole church.

* Central Conferences (in contrast to the Central Jurisdiction) were formed whereby governance of the church was conducted outside the United States. Central Conferences today exist in Europe, the Philippines, and Africa. They elect, consecrate, and assign their own bishops. Voting membership of the General Conference determined by membership claimed in various jurisdictions and central conferences. With exception of portions of Europe, the Central Conferences are financially dependent on the church in the United States. All delegates to General Conference vote on the budget and other financial matters, though basically only one part of the church contributes substantially to the budget through apportionments.

E. The voting memberships of the 2016 and now the 2019 General Conference will be about 30% Africa; 58.3% USA, 4.6% Europe, and 5.8% Philippines. Percentage from Africa will increase in 2020 & USA number will decline.

2. The Constitution of The United Methodist Church in 1968 emphasized "inclusiveness." Division One, Paragraph 4, Article IV, in 2016 *Book of Discipline* declares:

"The United Methodist Church is a part of the church universal, which is one Body in Christ. The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth. All persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic conditions, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, upon baptism be admitted as baptized members, and upon taking vows declaring the Christian faith, become professing members in any local church in the connection. In The United Methodist Church no conference or other organizational unit of the church shall be structured so as to exclude any member of any constituent body of the Church because of race, color, national origin, status or economic condition."

3. Church governance is organized similarly to the USA: legislative (General Conference), executive (Council of Bishops), and judicial (Judicial Council). But not quite! Elections and supervision of bishops is in the Jurisdictional and Central Conferences. The Judicial Council is really a panel, not a court, and its members may or may not have legal expertise. The latter has 9 members and is elected by the General Conference. Originally candidates for the office were elected by a slate submitted by Council of Bishops; now nominations from the floor prevail, as persons are basically selected and elected via political caucuses. Current membership has 7 of 9 members elected by the conservatives; at least five are from outside the United States. Have power to overrule General Conference action and Bishop's decisions.

4. Key question in matters of schism is "who gets the property?" The "trust clause" of the *Discipline* (#2501) clearly claims "all properties of United Methodist local churches and other United Methodist agencies and institutions are held, *in trust*, for the benefit of the entire denomination, and ownership and usage of church property is subject to the *Discipline*." A non-theological basis for church unity is the fact that those that exit leave with nothing,

Potential Schism Triggered Over Debate and Divide Regarding Homosexuality

1. In 1972 the General Conference inserted these words into the Social Principles document: "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching."

A. Subsequent General Conferences have debated and voted on these words. Various qualifying phrases and explanations have been added, primarily with intent to emphasize the sacredness of every individual, but the basic premise and prohibition has been retained

B. "Self-avowed practicing homosexuals" have been banned from the United Methodist clergy. This phrase has been the subject of endless controversies and cases before the Judicial Council. Determination of meaning dependent upon individual Annual Conferences and Boards of Ministry to determine

C. Efforts over the years to change wording have failed; sometimes by a rather close margin. In 2016 General Conference it was clear the provision would not be repealed; in fact, more restrictive and conservative legislation would prevail. Schism became more evident.

D. By a close margin of but 23 votes, decision was made to approve the Way Forward Commission to be created by the the Council of Bishops. This global committee was to study human sexuality and the unity of the church and to report back to a special General Conference in 2019. Fifty-nine pieces of conservative legislation that had been approved in Committee and likely to have passed were withdrawn from final vote.

2. Subsequent developments since 2016 General Conference

A. Diverse global Commission was formed and is functioning & reports to the UM Council of Bishops

B. Western Jurisdiction elected unanimously an openly lesbian bishop in good standing, Rev. Dr. Karen Oliveto, and assigned her to the Mountain Sky Area (Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Montana, and 2 churches in Idaho).

C. South Central Jurisdiction challenged her election and asked Judicial Council to declare her nomination, election, consecration, and appointment invalid.

D. Judicial Council in April, 2017, in a very obscure 19 page single spaced decision declared she could remain a bishop but should face charges in the Western Jurisdiction for being openly lesbian and publicly married to another woman.

E. In this decision and two others the Judicial Council declared for the first time that proof of a marriage certificate is tantamount to being a "self-avowed practicing homosexual"; an effort to insist Boards of Ministries in Annual Conference eliminate approving LGBTQ persons from ministry, since a number of boards publicly have declined to inquire into the sexual orientation and practices of candidates

F. Western Jurisdiction appealed the Bishop Oliveto decision, not in terms of her continuing in office, but asserting the Judicial Council does not have authority to legislate what constitutes a "self-avowed practicing homosexual." It dismissed this appeal.

G. Bishop Oliveto will face charges in the Western Jurisdiction in accord with the Judicial Council ruling, but no one expects any change, since ultimately the persons who will have to rule are the laity and clergy who elected her and the bishops who consecrated her!

So is schism inevitable?

1. No one knows. The One Church Plan would remove the language in the *Discipline* that asserts homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching and permit LGBTQ persons to be ordained and married in the church. Pastors and congregations, however, could refuse to perform marriages and conferences would not have to permit LGBTQ ordinations. Details as of June, 2018, were not very clear.

2. But groups like the new Wesleyan Covenant Association are urging a conservative approach and some speakers are arguing a METHEXIT--saying United Methodist progressives should leave the denomination! Efforts are underway to substitute the "traditionalist approach" that was not adopted by the Council of Bishops. This would tighten current restrictions against LGBTQ persons in the church.

3. Progressives say the time has come; unity but no more moral compromises like in 1939 that deny the dignity of all persons.

4. Governance of the church via the General Conference and Judicial Council appears to be firmly in the hands of conservatives, as Africans in particular appear aligned with conservatives in the USA. Recently the African bishops have indicated more interest in finding unity. Remember African delegations appear more "constructed" and less diverse and free in their voting patterns.

5. Whether "amicable separation" is possible remains unknown; issues of properties and endless legal questions and costs loom ahead

6. Church not divided over doctrine and mission, but on one question--whether LGBTQ persons are full members of the church and can serve as leaders at every level.

7. The "One Church Plan" is to have unity without uniformity.

8. An alternative would be to allow different regions of the world to govern themselves--making the United States into several Central Conferences such as now exist in Africa, Europe and the Philippines. But this approach has previously been proposed and rejected, and it would take a major change of opinion from Africa to have this happen.

9. So we come to a point in the life of the denomination, when prayer and hope prevail, with great uncertainty about the future.

10. What impact will the Holy Spirit have on United Methodism?