A Way Forward for a *United* Methodist Church

We stand at a crossroads in the United Methodist Church. The ongoing debate over homosexuality continues to divide us. One side believes that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. The other side believes that scriptures related to homosexuality are like scriptures related to the subordination of women, violence or the acceptance and regulation of slavery, reflecting the values of the times in which the scriptures were written more than the timeless will of God.

Every four years United Methodists meet for General Conference, devoting much time and energy to the debate over homosexuality. We leave General Conference more divided than ever. Some, believing the current policies of our denomination regarding homosexuals are unjust and do not reflect God’s will, call for a reversal of the language in the *Book of Discipline* restricting the rights of gay and lesbian people to marry or be ordained. Others suggest that if this were ever to happen, they would have no choice but to leave the denomination.

Some, in frustration with the current impasse, are now violating the *Discipline* and officiating at weddings for homosexuals. Others, frustrated that the *Discipline* is being flouted, are now calling for the formal division of the United Methodist Church into two denominations: one that holds that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, and which forbids the marriage of homosexual people and the ordination of self-avowed, practicing homosexuals. The other, presumably, would embrace homosexual marriage and ordination.

We, the undersigned, believe the division of the United Methodist Church over this issue would be shortsighted, costly, detrimental to all of our churches, and not in keeping with God’s will.

While some on either side of this issue see only two sides in the debate, a vast majority of our churches are divided on this issue. United Methodists have gay and lesbian children, friends, co-workers and neighbors. A large number of our churches have gay and lesbian members. Our members, like the broader society, are not of one mind on the issue of ordination or marriage for gay and lesbian people, and many find themselves confused about bisexuality and those who are transgender. Most of our churches, regardless of the dominant view of the issue in their congregation, stand to lose members if The United Methodist Church divides into two churches over homosexuality.

We believe the decision to divide the church over homosexuality would be shortsighted. Views on this issue in our society are rapidly changing, yet are far from settled. The February 2014 Pew Research Center poll found that 54% of Americans now favor the right of gay and lesbian people to marry, up from 31% just ten years ago. Among young adults, support for gay marriage is now at 66%.\(^1\) The church does not determine Christian ethics by looking at poll numbers. But, the poll numbers tell us that the people we are trying to reach, and the people in our pews, are divided and shifting on this issue. To form a new denomination primarily based upon opposition to homosexuality would

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negatively impact that Church’s ministry with 54% of the population, and two-thirds of young adults. Further, a significant majority of young clergy in the United Methodist Church hold a more progressive view on homosexuality. A denomination formed largely due to its opposition to homosexuality may find its ministry to younger adults increasingly difficult in the decades ahead.

We believe that the question of homosexuality is virtually irresolvable at General Conference. Maintaining our current position will force progressives to continue to violate the Discipline as a matter of conscience. Reversing the position at General Conference would force hundreds of thousands of our conservative members to leave the denomination as a matter of conscience, with devastating consequences to many of our churches, and in turn, to our shared mission and ministry together. **We believe there is a better way forward than the current impasse or the division of the United Methodist Church.**

Paragraphs 201-204 of The Book of Discipline note that the local church is the “most significant arena through which disciple making occurs.” It is “primarily at the level of the local charge...that the church encounters the world,” and “the local church is a strategic base from which Christians move out to the structures of society.” Further, it states that, “Each local church shall have a definite evangelistic, nurture and witness responsibility for its members and the surrounding area...it shall be responsible for ministering to all its members.”

In recent years the General Conference, through the Discipline, has given increasing permission for local churches to organize in ways that are most helpful to the congregation. Further, local churches already determine their own strategies and plans for making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This leads us to the following suggestion for how we move forward as a denomination:

**We propose that the United Methodist Church entrust to each local church the authority to determine how they will be in ministry with gay and lesbian people including whether they will, or will not, allow for homosexual marriages or unions.**

Under this plan the current position of the Discipline would become the position of each local church, but a local congregation, at the request of the senior pastor and with a supermajority vote of the members of the congregation and only after a process of prayer, study and discernment, could determine their own position. Churches could vote to adopt a more inclusive policy allowing for homosexuals to be married in their churches and welcoming gay and lesbian clergy. Conversely, they might take the position that their members are “not of one mind” on this issue and therefore postpone any decision until they gained greater clarity on the issue. Doing nothing would mean that they affirm the current disciplinary language. Traditionalist churches around the world would retain the current language in their local congregations. Strongly progressive churches could adopt more inclusive language and practices.

Regarding ordination, in keeping with the current provisions in the Book of Discipline empowering Boards of Ordained Ministry to review candidates for ordination, **we suggest that annual conferences be permitted to determine whether they will or will not ordain self-avowed, practicing homosexuals while allowing local churches to determine if they would or would not be willing to receive gay and lesbian clergy. In conferences where the ordination of gay and lesbian people was allowed, they would be**
held to the same standard heterosexual clergy are held to: fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness.

This proposal is, at this point, merely conceptual. There are many questions that must be answered and many details to be worked out. A study team will be working on legislation required to implement this policy. But we believe this concept gives us the best opportunity to address one of the most challenging issues the church faces today, and to do so in a way that honors each local church and reduces the harm that will inevitably come from either dividing the United Methodist Church, or continuing to force all churches to conform to one interpretation of scripture regarding the issue of homosexuality.

What Unites Us as United Methodists

United Methodist congregations already hold different views on how to interpret the scriptures related to homosexuality. They also have different ways of being in ministry with gay and lesbian people. What makes us United Methodists is not our position on homosexuality, but a core set of theological, missional and ministry convictions.

To be United Methodist is to believe, follow and serve Jesus Christ. It is to hold together a passionate and personal evangelical gospel and a serious and sacrificial social gospel. It is to hold together a deep and wide understanding of grace and a call to holiness of heart and life. It is to hold together a faith that speaks to the intellect and a faith that warms the heart. To be United Methodist is to be a people who study and seek to live scripture and who read it with the help of tradition, experience and reason. To be United Methodist is to invite the Spirit’s sanctifying work in our lives to the end that we might love God with all that is within us and love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

United Methodists believe that God’s grace is available to all, not only a predestined “elect.” We believe that God brings good from evil, but we don’t believe that God causes evil. We believe that it’s okay to ask questions and that we’re not meant to check our brains at the door of the church. We find helpful those guidelines we call the General Rules: Refrain from evil, do all the good you can, and do those things which help you grow in love for God. The Covenant Prayer is for us a powerful reminder of what it means to call Jesus Christ Lord: “I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what you will…”

United Methodists have at times been called people of the “radical center” or the “extreme center,” holding together the best of each side of the theological divide. It is this ability to hold together the important insights and perspectives of both the left and the right that is exemplified in a church that allows local congregations to hold varied scriptural interpretations on the issue of homosexuality.

We believe the world needs a vital United Methodist Church now more than ever. In an increasingly secular age, the world needs churches that can make an intellectually sound case for the gospel, proclaim a faith that touches the heart, and call Christians to action seeking to help our world look more like the kingdom of God. A vital United Methodism will remember its heritage and mission. It will be deeply devoted to Jesus Christ, and serious about its role as his body – in the world. If it will have a future, it must help gifted young adults to answer God’s call to full time Christian service. And it
must focus on both starting new congregations and working to revitalize existing congregations.

By moving the decision-making regarding homosexuality to the local church, we hope to end the rancor, animosity and endless debate that divide our denomination every four years at General Conference. What we propose would allow conservative, centrist and progressive churches to come to their own conclusions regarding this important issue and to focus on how best to minister in their own communities. We will be bound together by what we share in common, rather than posturing to impose our will upon one another in areas where we are so deeply divided.

United Methodists have an approach to the gospel that 21st century people can and will respond to. Our hope is that United Methodists might be united around our common heritage and our theological and missional convictions, so that we might be used by God to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

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