

Same Sex Marriage and the Future of the UMC

Adam Hamilton – May 6, 2015

<http://www.adamhamilton.org/blog/view/193/same-sex-marriage-and-the-future-of-the-umc>

A year ago, with input from others, I wrote a blog post called, [A Way Forward for a United Methodism?](#) In it we offered suggestions for how the United Methodist Church might move forward as it relates to the divide over homosexuality. It was written in response to some who were discussing dividing the denomination. It was written in consultation with evangelicals, moderates and progressives across the country. Over 2,000 pastors and hundreds of laity signed the document that you can read [here](#).

In the year since, there have been a host of other proposals that have surfaced as a way of moving our denomination beyond the impasse over same-gender relationships. I've been in dozens of conversations with various groups listening and looking for what might be a better way forward. I've yet to see a proposal that would seem to have a reasonable chance of passing at General Conference.

My assumptions about any proposed changes at General Conference include the following:

- 1) The more complicated the change, the less likely it will pass.
- 2) The more places in the Discipline that must be changed, the less likely it will pass.
- 3) The more radical the change, the less likely that it will pass.

It also seems to me that conservatives are underestimating the number of evangelicals, including many pastors of our largest churches, who have come to see this issue differently in the last few years. Their changing understanding does not reflect a departure from theological orthodoxy or evangelical passion, nor does it reflect a reduced view of biblical authority. Instead these persons recognize the complexity of scripture and see the Bible's teaching on same-gender relationships as similar to the Bible's teaching on slavery, violence in the name of God, the role of women in the church and a host of other things found in the Bible but which we no longer believe reflect God's will for us today.

Response to Adam Hamilton

Wesley White – May 7, 2015

It is of note that "A Way Forward for a United Methodism" is described as having been vetted by three theological categories, but not by those over whom some theoretical divide continues to harm. No number of "evangelicals, moderates, and progressives" can have an equivalent voice to that of LGBTQ persons and their family/community. No number of pastors can speak for those being harmed. Look again at the story of Greek widows being harmed in Acts 6.

There has not been a host of other proposals that move us forward. They all fall under the same difficulty—they are not in the voice of the LGBTQ community. The voice there is universal in simply ridding the church of the single, named people who, claimed by some, stand outside the gifts and call of God and Christ to life and ministry within the church. Again wisdom from Acts is pertinent here (see chapter 10).

Thank you for naming your assumptions. However, they are simply that and not particularly helpful:

- 1) It is a dangerous beginning spot, to think that United Methodists cannot handle complications in life or thought.
- 2) This is simply a particular application of 1).
- 3) This continues a limited view of the heart of United Methodists.

It is not particularly comforting to think how long it has taken some number of "evangelicals" to see what continued discrimination is doing to our ability to evangelize. Like it or not, theological orthodoxy, evangelical passion, and biblical authority are, historically, the last roadblocks to the expansion of expressions of God's ability to be a Living God and Jesus to welcome the most outcast, live among them, and witness God's love through these acts. The Bible is no more or less complex than it was before. The slowness to see "God's will for us today" is not helped with a continued slowness to wait for the last prejudiced person comes "to see this differently". If you have come to see LGBTQ people differently, act on it.

It also seems to me that many of our progressives are underestimating the number of people in our denomination, and in most of our local churches, who are not ready to ordain persons in same-sex relationships, nor host same-sex marriages in their churches. In most United Methodist churches there are a significant number of people who lean conservative on this issue. For conservatives the question of same-sex relationships is not about justice, but about faithfulness to Scripture, as they understand it. To completely reverse the denomination's position, even if progressives and moderates had the votes, would mean a significant loss of membership and vitality in many local churches, and across the denomination.

Finding a way forward means we must see this issue through the eyes of the other. Progressives must see the issue through the eyes of earnest, thoughtful conservatives. Conservatives must see the issue through the eyes of earnest, thoughtful centrists and progressives. Even the terms we use to describe our own position might need to change. It is possible to be conservative on this issue, and still love justice and inclusivity. It is also possible to be progressive on this issue and still be theologically orthodox and passionately evangelical.

I continue to believe that the best way forward is to allow United Methodist pastors to determine who they will and will not marry, while allowing local churches to determine their own wedding policies as it relates to the usage of their building. This is currently how things are done for heterosexual marriages. Pastors meet with couples and determine whether they will or will not officiate, and local churches develop wedding policies for the use of their buildings.

Under this scenario the current language of the *Discipline* regarding homosexuality and same-sex weddings would become the "historic position" of the United Methodist Church and the default policy of each local church regarding same-sex marriage. The *Discipline* would allow local churches to adopt a more permissive policy towards same-sex marriage. Only churches that felt compelled to change the default position would take a vote. Conservative churches would continue as they are. Moderates might spend several years in conversation before deciding whether to make a change to the default position. Progressives would vote right away to adopt a different policy. Likewise, while a pastor would be bound by the local church's policies for weddings

It seems to this liberal/radical that you may be underestimating the number of people in our denomination who ARE ready to ordain LGBTQ people gifted and called to ordained ministry and to see the marriage of their sons and daughters and nieces and nephews and friends duly celebrated in the church. As long as we leave this in the realm of "seems", fears will always come to the fore. "Seems" always brings the worst speculation to the fore before we can look at the movement of Spirit through history and in our own time. We are a people who have added the gift of "Experience" to the previous trinity of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason to be an antidote to "seems" and present fears. When we separate "faithfulness" from "justice" we wound ourselves and the world around us.

Yes, let us look through the eyes of the other. Note, however, that the "other" needed here is not a Conservative/Progressive difference where we somehow catch enough of a glimpse of our self in that "other" and budge ever so slightly. The "other" needed here is for everyone who is not LGBTQ in orientation, to look through the eyes of those who are discriminated against, castigated, described as "incompatible", shunned, and even beaten and killed. Both Progressives and Conservatives have been complicit in delaying a transformation of the church, much less the world.

The issue of local control is but another delaying tactic that allows theological orthodoxy, evangelical passion, and biblical authority to keep us from experiencing again how unsurprising it is for God to call for renewal from the most unlikely of places and people. Patchwork discrimination keeps the battle between "progressives" and "conservatives" boiling and even heightens it as it moves into local settings.

This imagined move to "historic position" does not become an historic position until there is a change in *The Book of Discipline*. Until that time it divides our Method of engaging the "Nature of our Theological Task" laid out in *The Book of Discipline—2012* (¶105, pp. 79–80).

There is a naïve assumption here that there are conservative congregations, progressive congregations, and moderate congregations. This model forgets how we need each other and further divides us. We are in the business of revealing a Jesus Way together or we are not. More could be said to demonstrate how flawed this approach is, but folks either get it or don't.

within the walls of the church, each pastor would determine who they would and would not marry outside of the walls of their local church.

I believe we can trust local churches to make this decision. Some have suggested that allowing local churches to make this decision will be the end of connectionalism and will signal that we have adopted a congregational polity. But it is not our position on homosexuality that makes us a connectional church; rather, it is our shared ministry, our shared doctrinal standards, our appointive process, our episcopacy, and our trust clause that are the hallmarks of our connectionalism.

If the General Conference (or under some proposals the Annual Conference) continues to adopt a one-size-fits-all policy forced upon local churches and pastors we can anticipate that this issue will continue to be our focus for the next twenty years, with continuing conflict year after year.

Regarding ordination, decisions are largely made at the Annual Conference level. Let's let annual conferences make decisions regarding the ordination of married homosexual* candidates for ministry. Conservative conferences will not ordain married homosexuals. Progressive conferences will ordain such persons. Moderate conferences may come up with creative new solutions. These solutions are more likely to be developed at an annual conference than during the two weeks of General Conference meeting once every four years. Again, it seems that trying to create a one-size-fits-all policy for the entire denomination does not take into account the vast differences in different regions across the denomination.

We are a denomination divided over how we interpret the scriptures regarding same-sex relationships; most of our congregations are also divided. Any possible solution must allow room for differences of opinion. What seems clear to me is that a viable long-term strategy cannot be found in a one-sized-fits-all policy imposed upon every church in every region and nation by the 800 delegates to the next General Conference.

*I mention married homosexuals as opposed to "practicing" homosexuals as the Discipline calls for celibacy in singleness and fidelity in marriage.

The trust clause is an indication of our lack of trust or it wouldn't be there. The lack of leadership by the episcopacy in favor of some uniformity of response that reduces us to good-thoughts and prayers-at-a-distance has unconnected us from those we harm whether that be a recent statement about racism or lack thereof regarding orientationism. Doctrinal standards and ordination restrictions that are based on false witness are not places of connecting with one another.

One size does fit all if we are talking about love and grace. No amount of tinkering with one or another proposal from strengthening the current sin of casting our family out and dividing ourselves, one from another, to more modest forms of the same will honorably heal us. The fault is in ourselves.

Ordination decisions are to be made in the Annual Conference, except for those removed from them by *The Book of Discipline*. Playing the "married" card is but a variation of "fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness" game-playing that its authors have confessed to being code language for "keep the gays out". It sets the bar at the wrong place—appearance rather than the call and gift of Spirit. How many of these appearance games have we already come through—dancing, smoking, divorce, etc.—and how many more are we going to have to go through before we are willing to submit our denomination to the Covenant Service we currently limit to individuals. John Wesley was right that reform of the nation begins in the church.

Yes, our congregations are made up of many opinions. This is evidence that the conservative, progressive, moderate congregation argument above really doesn't hold water.

Intentionally harming LGBTQ people with our current legislation is a one-size for all and is imposed with many different rationales. Whether those rationales are conservative or progressive, they pale in the face of a Living God.

*There is no cute, linguistic way out of the corner into which we have painted ourselves. We are ever reforming or we end up on the dust heap of history.