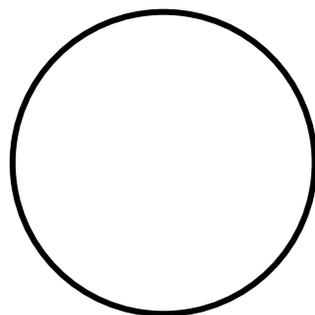


The ONE CHURCH PLAN

A CRITIQUE IN PREPARATION FOR
UNITED METHODIST
SPECIAL GENERAL CONFERENCE



2019

Wesley White

The One Church Plan:
A Critique in Preparation for
United Methodist General Conference 2019

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1. Church / United Methodist
2. Church / Social Justice
3. Spirituality / Applied

DEDICATION

To the creative people of Love Prevails
who use the gift of showing up
to make a difference

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“A church that rushes to punishment is not open to God’s mercy, but a church lacking the courage to act decisively on personal and social issues loses its claim to moral authority.”

“Devising formal definitions of doctrine has been less pressing for United Methodists than summoning people to faith and nurturing them in the knowledge and love of God.”

¶102 *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*

Introduction

Welcome

“Welcome,” is a creative word.

“Welcome,” invites participation in the dance of life.

“Welcome,” is a vision of abundance.

“Welcome,” acknowledges another.

“Welcome,” grows individuals and institutions.

The United Methodist Church has had an “unWelcome” streak since its beginning. An early sign that culturally-approved stigma tore at the fabric of the church occurred when persons with darker skin were forced to the rear of the balcony and then out of the church. Within three years of the founding of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, Richard Allen left to begin The Free African Society that became the first independent black denomination—The African Methodist Episcopal Church. Eventually, the whole Methodist Episcopal Church split into North and South over slavery. This division lasted for 95 years (1844–1939)—the longest time of institutional “stability” in United Methodist history.

A condition of the Methodist Episcopal Church South to rejoin the Methodist Episcopal Church North was an appeal to “religious liberty” for themselves and subsequent formation of a Central Jurisdiction. This structure lumped all Black churches into one Jurisdiction and had the effect of segregating and weakening their presence and power. Enshrining institutional discrimination to protect personal prejudice in the name of unity is an old, old game.

In 1968, The United Methodist Church was born of a two-denomination merger. A first order of business was the abolishment of the segregated Central Jurisdiction. This accorded with the 1954 Supreme Court ruling that separate schools (Jurisdictions) based on race was unconstitutional.

In 1972, a motion from the floor led to a next round of identifying a particular characteristic as making a person less than fully human. This time it was an identity of sexual orientation rather than skin color that led to the closing of the church balcony by categorizing Lesbians and Gays as “incompatible with Christian teaching.”. Since then, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and other non-heterosexual-oriented persons (LGBTQ+) have been tarred by the same broad brush.

Forty-six years later, we are on the verge of another split over a natural

variation of humanity. We will see if the church will again follow a Supreme Court ruling (2003) that “the state cannot demean their [gays’] existence or control their destiny....” and say “The United Methodist Church cannot legislate LGBTQ+ persons into incompatibility with G*D’s Love, Jesus’ Church, and Spirit’s Community.”

The parallels between race and sexuality are striking. Through no fault of their own, specific identities are deemed unacceptable by an official majority of General Conference delegates. Those desiring a review of the dynamics that have brought us to this point will be well served by reading *Homosexuality and The United Methodist Church: An Ecclesiological Dilemma* by Tiffany L. Steinwert (https://open.bu.edu/bitstream/handle/2144/1336/steinwert_tiffany_phd_2009.pdf).

In 2019, a variety of “Plans” will come to a specially-called session of General Conference in an attempt to clarify to what extent, if any, a majority vote can displace “God’s good gift” of sexuality “to all persons” (*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, ¶161.f).

Notes about this critique

This critique focuses on the One Church Plan, as the one most likely to pass at General Conference because it is the current favorite of a comfortable majority of bishops. This critique implores delegates not to take any petition at face value. This means analyzing and anticipating the likely long-term consequence of their vote past the immediate appeal for a temporary “unity.”

This means carefully considering the biases of language and institutional structure implicit in this and other Plans. This means recognizing the pain already caused to LGBTQ+ church members cannot be made equivalent to any loss felt by those no longer able to disappear LGBTQ+ persons. The whole appeal to “religious liberty” is to claim that “incompatibility” can be authorized in specific, local, situations by a majority vote and needs nothing else to justify discrimination.

It is crucial to be clear that the One Church Plan consists only of 17 petitions to change 17 paragraphs in the *United Methodist Book of Discipline*. All other material, including this critique, for and against this or any other plan falls within the general realm of an attempt to garner votes—commonly known as propaganda. The only things that will be voted on for the One Church Plan are 17 disciplinary changes and, under Robert’s Rules, these petitions can be changed in any number of directions. If people are distracted by endorsements of and rationales for a supposed unity within the One Church Plan, without attending to the particulars of the petitions, all manner of devilish details are likely to be swept in and, eventually,

be used against the very intention of unity.

The perspective of this critique contains:

- awareness of deceptive and coded language,
- appreciation of LGBTQ+ persons and their faith journeys,
- sensitivity to subtle language choices influenced by those who “do not condone” the lives of LGBTQ+ persons,
- concern about future misuse of the petitions, and
- hope that delegates will find ways to mitigate the harm instituted in the current One Church Plan.

The format will:

- 1) begin with a brief setting of context,
- 2) use bold print and a different font to quote a petition in whole, section-by-section, or sentence-by-sentence, and
- 3) note difficulties that go beyond a “law” review by the Judicial Council.

My particular way of thinking about these matters suggests that legislative votes will not mean anything if there is not first a softening of hearts. Such a change of heart and behavior needs to go all the way to repentance for harm already done and a willingness to be proactive in repairing the breach between our excuses not to welcome and G*D’s invitation to welcome strangers and angels that come with them. Stopping short of acknowledging that harm has happened, even the removal of the “incompatibility” clause, will not bring healing.

This critique intends to help bring clarity to the decisions that need to be made in 2019 and encourage delegates to find creative options beyond the presenting Plans. Included are a few beginning modifications of the petitions intended to stimulate delegates to use their own wisdom to shape the petitions, not just accept them with their present weaknesses.

The only way out of this cycle of discrimination by a thousand cuts is a commitment to never again develop legislation about LGBTQ+ persons (or others).

Regarding other plans:

- **The Simple Plan** — has the advantage of removing the hurtful language of “incompatibility.” Its difficulty is that we are not able to return to 1972. Nearly 50 years on we know that silence is not the way to deal with falsehoods. The Simple Plan needs an affirmation of LGBTQ+ persons, not simply a removal of harmful legislation. Too much history has accumulated since 1972 and we can’t presume that removal of legislation is a sufficient response. Repentance of having gone down a wrong track is needed.

- **The Connectional Conference Plan** — was initiated by those who “do not condone” LGBTQ+ persons and who have brought parallel church structures to The United Methodist Church—alternative mission-sending agency, alternative publishing house, and alternative organization of women. Its complexity would cover the result that “incompatible” language would still be lodged in at least one-third of the resultant conferences. This makes it the equivalent of a shell game.
- **The Traditional(ist) Plan** — exacerbates a penalty-driven approach to church governance through adherence to doctrinal and institutional purity. There is no modification of it that will improve its basic approach of mechanizing church processes and lose the discernment of the importance of each part of G*D’s creation, Christ’s church, and Human community.

A question: Will The United Methodist Church reconnect spirituality with sexuality so whatever affectionate orientation or physical reality a person has or does not have can find both support and correction in their real-life circumstance?

Another question: Will The United Methodist Church widely and abundantly welcome or further split over the current dismissal of LGBTQ+ persons?

May General Conference 2019 know what awakens Welcome and follow it all the way to Rising.

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*Note: There are spellings of G*D and Neighb*r included. The asterisk indicates that there is more to be found beyond what can be put into language. These are markers of mystery and intended to be open to more than can be defined by a dictionary or doctrine.*

Critique

One Church Plan #1

Our Theological Task – Par. 105

The location of ¶105 is not an appropriate location for this petition. It interrupts the flow of the paragraph anywhere it might finally be lodged. ¶105 says, “...theological reflection is energized by our incarnational involvement in the daily life of the church and the world...” This petition seeks permission to allow some to be exempt from Jesus' direction to “love one another” by their “not condoning” LGBTQ+ persons.

Amend ¶ 105 by adding new sub-paragraph as follows:

We agree that we are not of one mind regarding human sexuality.

- United Methodists do claim to be of one mind about human sexuality, “We affirm that sexuality is God's good gift” (¶161.f).
- That affirmation is now being constrained to privilege heterosexuality over all other expressions of God's good gift.
- What we are not of one mind about is how to engage our spiritual lives with our sexual lives. Like the Sabbath, a gift of healthy sexuality is made for humans and, like spirituality, needs to be grown into.
- At this point, an emphasis on unity keeps us from disarming the harm caused to LGBTQ+ persons by an intentional dismissal of their good gift.

As we continue to faithfully explore issues of sexuality, we will honor the theological guidelines of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience, acknowledging that God's revelation of truth and God's extension of grace as expressed in Jesus Christ (John 1:14) may cause persons of good conscience to interpret and decide issues of sexuality differently.

- ¶105 is about the “critical and constructive” and “contextual and incarnational” natures of Our Theological Task and this petition puts all that under a new and problematic category of a stand-alone “revelation”.
- It is not different interpretations that cause our current impasse. It is

the claiming that one interpretation is “revealed” as true and right, now and forever, world without end. Amen.

- The first part of this sentence is a restatement of ¶105 that doesn’t need to be repeated.
- At issue is acknowledging an undefined “revelation” that uses scripture, reason, tradition, and experience to justify that “revelation”, not clarify it or repent it if we got it wrong.
- We are asked to believe that revelation is a source of critical difference that creates the very differences it is called on to resolve. This sort of revelation eats at the very core of United Methodist heritage and sets a predetermined truth above the freedom of grace.
- The proof-texting of John 1:14 fits none of the categories of the use of Scripture, reason, tradition, or experience. Its only purpose as a reference seems to be to make a bare assertion sound authoritative and does not justify the bad ecclesiology that “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.”
- It is not “good conscience” that is at stake here but the values of engagement and partnership with a Living G*D. A conscience that denies any truth or evidence but its own must live in constant fear of change (or a new revelation).
- Note: There was a General Conference mandated study about human sexuality (1988–1992) and General Conference refused to act on it because it raised questions about the accepted “revelation” of the time.

We also acknowledge that the Church is called through Christ to unity even amidst complexity.

- Everything on either side of this statement leans toward an excuse for shunning or an exemption from welcoming a portion of church members.
- This statement does fit ¶105, but is a redundancy and is better stated by the current section on “The Nature of Our Theological Task.”

We affirm those who continue to maintain that the scriptural witness does not condone the practice of homosexuality.

- This overly bold statement cannot stand examination. We can also say a “scriptural witness does not condone divorce” or any number of other items. This is merely a sneaky way to attempt to appease those most opposed to the reality that LGBTQ+ persons are as gifted by G*D as they are and insist on everyone believing what they believe or they will leave. It has no place in this important paragraph of the *Discipline* (§105).
- There has been no groundwork laid for this naked “affirmation.”
- This affirmation can be extended to those who insist that handling poisonous snakes is part of good liturgy. Affirming the stage a person is at does not mean they can avoid being challenged. Support and correction are needed in every life.
- This presumes scripture only has one voice, has no historical basis, and is oriented toward purity codes that have always been used as wedge issues.
- There is no room here for growth of understanding through the movement of a Spirit of a Living G*D and the Blessing of Neighb*rs different from one’s self.
- This is the beginning of a false equivalency that builds in a false choice that can only be met by segregating members from each other by a majority vote based present understandings.

We believe that their conscience should be protected in the Church and throughout society under basic principles of religious liberty.

- This petition goes far beyond §105. It subverts and refutes the paragraph by claiming a right to close one's eyes and ears and heart to the lives of others. It implies that those who claim this protection are too weak to engage with differences honestly and must either be left alone or given-in to.
- A basic principle of “religious liberty” is that it cannot be given to another. “Religious liberty” can only be lived and face the consequences of its actions.
- Here, those who desire “not to condone” LGBTQ+ persons in the specifics of marriage and ordination are given permission to do so with no consequence. This is coddling.
- “Religious liberty” is a code phrase that says, “I am an island and rule all I see—I am not connected with others in the community, extreme

individualism rules.” It is an excuse to be exempt from common human decency and love of neighbors who are different in one way or another.

- “Religious liberty,” asks to be affirmed but always in the context of specifically and intentionally not affirming others. To claim a religious liberty is an act of privilege.
- There is no “religious liberty” exemption available when wrestling with the Theological Tasks of ¶105. We are to do our work with assurance while in the midst of complexity.

We also affirm those who believe the witness of Scripture calls us to reconsider the teaching of the Church with respect to monogamous homosexual relationships.

- This is the false equivalency meant to justify the above claims of both “revelation” and “religious liberty.” It does not accurately describe the motivation of those opposed to the “incompatibility” clause and its descendants in the *Book of Discipline*.
- This is a terrible attribution of intention to those desiring to remove the heresy of “incompatibility” from the *Discipline*. Simply put, “incompatibility” is harmful and hurtful to those who employ it and those against whom it is used. It is a portable harm that can be applied to any current out-group that can be blamed for whatever is imagined. As John Wesley didn’t rely on the witness of scripture in his opposition to slavery, it is not needed to consider how “incompatible” language is actual, factual, harm being done to real, live, persons.
- Whoever wrote these phrases thinking they were comparing apples to apples profoundly misunderstands fair play. These descriptions of a false equivalency are loaded and lean toward the language patterns of Good News and Wesley Covenant Association.
- “Teaching of the Church” is an unfortunate phrase. “Incompatibility” legislation was falsely presented as settled teaching in 1972 and is now in the current *Discipline*. Opponents of this legislation do not ask for a “reconsideration” of “church teaching.” The obviousness of harm having been done needs no “witness of Scripture” or other reconsideration before it is recognized as real and changed.
- Note in passing the introduction of the descriptor “monogamous.” It has the feel of a code word attempting to replace the current “one man, one woman” language now employed to be a barrier against LGBTQ+ persons.

- Note, also, there is no subsequent rationale why “reconsideration” of church law that is harmful, hurtful, and killing should take place. This absence points to the bias of all 17 petitions.
- The previous sentence of this petition ends with the justification of “religious liberty,” but there is no such language here to indicate why changing a hurtful law would be worthwhile, only a mention that some people would like to make this change. The religious freedom to welcome all, and the right of all to be welcomed into a religious community, is not mentioned.

This petition is not theological in nature, as described in ¶105. It is the ground of continued discord and future legislation to slowly reestablish the “condoning” of restrictions of God's Grace. There is no comfort here for the lives and witness of LGBTQ+ United Methodists within their own church or LGBTQ+ persons experiencing heterosexist state legislation around the world that permits and encourages the abusing, imprisoning, and murdering our LGBTQ+ sisters and brothers.

This legislation is not needed for a One Church Plan and only gives the thinnest of cover for legislation that falsely claims to be unifying. The definitions it offers are incorrect and biased. Its language is loaded toward an orthodoxy of the past that restricts, restrains, and rebukes Theological Tasks of ¶ 105.

If nothing else is changed, this petition needs to be defeated. There is no redeeming it by amendment. It is the worst of the lot as it justifies individual prejudice growing to intentional discrimination. This is not about a false “religious liberty”, but a step toward doctrinalism.

One further note is a quote from ¶105 in the section “The Present Challenge to Theology in the Church.”

United Methodists as a diverse people continue to strive for consensus in understanding the gospel. In our diversity, we are held together by a shared inheritance and a common desire to participate in the creative and redemptive activity of God.

This petition says that, in practice, we prefer choosing single-issue advocacy as our defining focus, painfully splitting over human identity issues. This contrasts poorly to our professed “common desire” for the “redemptive activity of G*D,”.

If a petition of an additional affirmation of individual differences within a larger context of United Methodist unity is felt as needed, I propose the following:

Amend ¶126 by adding a new sub-paragraph as follows:

After years of discord over the varieties of human sexuality, we affirm that sexuality is God's good gift and our differences with one another will not keep The United Methodist Church or its members from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

One Church Plan #2
Social Principles - Par. 161C

The backstory is that language about “union of one man and one woman” and “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness” were deliberately added to *The Book of Discipline* to be an additional guard against same-sex relationships. This is the confession of Bishop Tuell, a principal author of the legislation (see Steinwert, p. 67). The One Church Plan does not deal with all the places discriminatory language about LGBTQ+ persons occurs. At best this petition tinkers with legislation about marriage without addressing the core issue of human relationships, the connection between spirituality and sexuality, or healthy and unhealthy sexuality, regardless of the orientation of those participating.

Amend ¶161.C as follows:

C) Marriage—We affirm the sanctity of the monogamous marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity, traditionally understood as a union of one man and one woman ~~between a man and a woman.~~

- There needs to be a larger conversation about monogamy, particularly in the context of a denomination increasingly weighted toward an African presence.
- For now file “monogamous” as a code word of unknown intent that is spreading through the Discipline for no apparent reason. It adds nothing here. It is best to say it simply: “We affirm marriage that is expressed in”
- This attempt at softening language by adding a fudge word of “tradition” provides comfort for those who “will not condone” a marriage relationship for LGBTQ+ persons and who attempt to keep them on a tighter and tighter leash.
- Many will see a “tradition” of an exclusive man/woman context as more important than the qualities of marriage just listed—“love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity.” This means ground has been laid for next debates, disputes, and despair about this “tradition” being the norm for all times and places.

We believe that God’s blessing rests upon such marriage, whether or not there are children of the union. We reject social norms that assume different standards for women than for men in marriage.

- Note there is room here to add language such as: “...different marriage standards for women than for men and for heterosexuals than for those of other orientations.”

Where laws in civil society define marriage as union between two adults, no United Methodist clergy shall be required to celebrate or bless a same-sex union. ~~We support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.~~

- This legislation is oriented toward those who “do not condone” LGBTQ+ persons and their relationships. It carves out an exception to pastoral ministry that restricts G*D’s good gift of sexuality.
- Marriage is no longer based on “love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity” but on one’s sexual orientation. This is a debasement of marriage and pastoral ministry.

I hope a delegate will move to amend ¶161.C by substitution:

C) Marriage—We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity. We believe God’s blessing rests upon such a relationship, whether or not it bears children. We reject social norms that assume different marriage standards for women than for men or heterosexuals than for those of other orientations.

Rationale: This returns the gift of mystery to marriage and emphasizes the qualities of the relationship over any other legal or social construct. It confirms that pastoral involvement with every marriage is to be based on the same criteria. Other parts of the *Discipline* allow for pastoral discretion as to whether or not to officiate. That is sufficient. Any spelled-out exception casts doubt on marriage as a blessing.

One Church Plan #3
Social Principles – Par. 161G

This is the cleanest and clearest petition in the One Church Plan. There is no attempt to carve out a place where clergy and congregations can receive permission to subvert the plain meaning of the *Discipline*. The other petitions all have some form of special pleading for those who “do not condone” LGBTQ+ persons as worthy of a marriage relationship or ordination.

Amend ¶ 161.G as follows:

G) Human Sexuality—We affirm that sexuality is God’s good gift to all persons. We call everyone to responsible stewardship of this sacred gift. Although all persons are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sexual relations are affirmed only with the covenant of monogamous heterosexual marriage between two adults. We deplore all forms of the commercialization, abuse, and exploitation of sex. We call for strict global enforcement of laws prohibiting the sexual exploitation of children and for adequate protection, guidance, and counseling for abused children. All persons, regardless of age, gender, marital status, or sexual orientation, are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured and to be protected against violence. The Church should support the family in providing age-appropriate education regarding sexuality to children, youth, and adults. We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God. All persons need the ministry of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. ~~The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.~~ We affirm that God’s grace is available to all. We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.

- The originating heresy of nearly 50 years of aggression toward “homosexuality” is, at long last, removed.
- Delegates need to note that language in the next-to-last line needs updating to include what is referenced in the short-hand of “LGBTQ+ persons”.

- However, the One Church Plan does not remove every subsequent restriction that grew out of the “incompatibility” clause. That is work it leaves for subsequent General Conferences.
- Delegates could add the petitions from the Simple Plan to those of the One Church Plan and have a more comprehensive and coherent result from the 2019 Special General Conference. But even that would not take care of the oversight that there is no acknowledgment of wrong and harm having been done since 1972.
- My hope is that this petition will be adopted and all the rest of the One Church petitions will be defeated as they all carry the seeds of greater difficulty for General Conferences and the church at large in the years after 2019. Additional adjustments to rectify the deficiencies of the other 16 petitions will need to begin in 2020.

One Church Plan #4

Qualifications for Ordination – Par. 304.3

Here is an attempt to put the political weight of a bishop behind the pressuring of a Board of Ordained Ministry to turn a blind-eye to the removal of the “incompatibility” clause and carve out an annual conference exception.

Amend ¶ 304.3 as follows:

3. While persons set apart by the Church for ordained ministry are subject to all the frailties of the human condition and the pressures of society, they are required to maintain the highest standards of holy living in the world. The responsibility for determining how standards, including standards related to human sexuality, may apply to certification or ordination in a given annual conference falls to the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry and the clergy session of the annual conference. The bishop may choose to seek the non-binding advice of an annual conference session on standards relating to human sexuality for ordination to inform the Board of Ordained Ministry in its work. ~~The practice of homosexuality incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexual persons are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as minister or appointed to serve in the United Methodist Church.~~

- While it is good to see the weed seed of our current division over human sexuality dug out of our *Book of Discipline*, it remains immensely disappointing that the bargain being struck for its removal is a local option to keep nurturing its discord at every level of the church.
- Given the action to remove the “incompatibility” clause and its extension into ordination standards, the only reason for bishop-sponsored advice to a Board of Ordained Ministry is to reinstate a ban on LGBTQ+ ordinands informally.
- This reveals that “religious liberty” is not just a matter of individual conscience but part of an organized attempt to keep the Grace of a good gift from G*D at bay within the institutional church.
- I recommend simply striking the last two sentences from the current ¶304.3 so it would read:

3. While persons set apart by the Church for ordained ministry are subject to all the frailties of the human condition and the pressures of society, they are required to maintain the highest standards of holy living in the world.

One Church Plan #5

Candidacy – Par. 310.2.d footnote

Previous additions to this footnote are evidence of the thorough diligence of those who “do not condone” LGBTQ+ persons to put their objections everywhere, including this footnote.

It will be interesting to see where this energy to control goes when LGBTQ+ persons are no longer able to be used to arouse fear. Will it be a return to abortion or a new fixation on Muslims or language/immigrant groups? Will it fuel yet another doctrinal attempt to make United Methodists into biblicists?

Amend ¶ 310.2.d footnote as follows.

The General Conference, ~~in response to expressions throughout the Church regarding homosexuality and ordination,~~ reaffirms the present language of the Discipline regarding the character and commitment of persons seeking ordination and affirms its high standards. . . .

- The rationale for this petition indicates it is being amended to reflect changes made in Petitions 2 and 3 above—expanding marriage beyond a heterosexual couple and removing the “incompatibility” clause.
- With those changes, there is no longer a reason not to delete this whole paragraph from the footnote.
 - The undeleted language says nothing that is not already in the text of the *Discipline* and is not needed in a footnote.
 - The undeleted language that “reaffirms the present language of the Discipline” will pose a difficulty if the 2019 General Conference is not able to do a thorough revision of its legislation regarding human sexuality.

~~In The Social Principles the General Conference has said that we “do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.” Furthermore, the Principles state that “we affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between two adults between a man and a woman.~~

- The same rationale as above means this whole paragraph in a footnote is redundant as it is already being present in the text of the *Discipline*. Delete it all.
- Deletion of these two paragraphs will return the footnote to the historic issue of smoking and what it offers in the way of a model of reflection on how anyone, including clergy, might live their life in the face of any form of addiction.

One Church Plan #6 and #7

Ministry of Deacons and an Elder – Par. 329 and 224

These two petitions (6 & 7) are the same petition. In one case they are directed toward Deacons and in the other toward Elders. In both cases, they continue the theme already heard—a built-in excuse not to treat LGBTQ+ persons with the same pastoral care as heterosexual persons.

Amend ¶ 329 by adding new sub-paragraph after ¶ 329.3

¶ 329.4 In conferences where civil law permits a pastor to perform a same-sex marriage service, no deacon in full connection shall at any time be required or compelled to perform, or prohibited from performing, any marriage, union, or blessing of same-sex couples, or of any couples. Each deacon shall have the right to exercise his or her conscience to refuse or agree when requested to perform any marriages, unions, or blessing as a matter of his or her individual religious liberty.

and

Amend ¶ 334 by adding new sub-paragraph after ¶ 334.5

¶ 334.6. In conferences where civil law permits a pastor to perform same-sex marriage services, no elder shall at any time be required or compelled to perform, or prohibited from performing, any marriage, union, or blessing of same-sex couples, or of any couples. Each elder shall have the right to exercise his or her conscience to refuse or agree when requested to perform such marriages, unions, or blessing as a matter of his or her individual religious liberty.

- The *Discipline* is clear that clergy have the authority to decide whether or not to officiate at a wedding (¶340.2.a.3.a). This addition authorizes a local option for discrimination under the disguise of “religious liberty”.
- While there are expectations of pre-marital counseling and determining the fitness of those coming to be married, it must be admitted that weddings are more of a social and state function than religious. The *Discipline* has an interesting parenthetical statement about pastors and marriage in ¶316. Among a pastor’s duties is the “...service of marriage (where state laws allow)....” This highlights that marriage is less religious/doctrinal and more a social or state concern.

- I would contend that these petitions are mislocated. ¶¶329 and 334 are about clergy voting, holding office in an annual conference, professional competency, and relationship to one another. Being able to decide about officiating at a marriage on any ground other than treating every couple on the same basis goes beyond the scope of these paragraphs.
- Again, the “religious liberty” phrase turns up to defend those in a pastoral role who would establish a pocket of discrimination. There is no similar concern given for LGBTQ+ persons who will have the church’s back turned to them one more time. It gives permission to use orientation as a reason not to officiate.
- With this understanding of what is behind the petitions, no paragraph can honestly hold them.
- Delegates will have the opportunity to consider and project where such permission-giving will lead by General Conference 2024. Hopefully, they will then vote “No” when these petitions come to the floor for a vote.

One Church Plan #8

Responsibilities of Elders and Licensed Pastors – Par. 340

This petition is gratuitously redundant as 340.2.a.3.a clearly says, “The decision to perform the ceremony shall be the right and responsibility of the pastor.” What it adds is an excuse for a pastor’s resistance to LGBTQ+ persons rather than pastoral care for the “love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity” of the couple.

Amend ¶ 340 by adding new sub-paragraph after ¶ 340.2

¶ 340.3 a. Each clergy shall have the right to exercise his or her conscience when requested to perform such marriages, unions, or blessing as a matter of his or her individual religious liberty.

- Since pastor’s already have the right not to perform a marriage (in the ¶ before this new addition), the apparent reason for this petition is to introduce “religious liberty” in yet another place in the *Discipline*. Again, it claims a right available for the clergy to protect themselves from charges of discrimination and dismisses any expectation of fair play toward LGBTQ+ persons.
- “Religious liberty” permeates these petitions. It is a code word of the religious-right. This is an example of using this phrase so often that people think they know what it means and they become deaf to its inherent privilege. The number of times it is used also increases the possibility that it will make it in somewhere. That seed can then be used in subsequent General Conferences to spread to every part of the *Discipline* in the same way the “incompatible” phrase spawned a multitude of other legislation to normalize the harm and hurt that it intentionally caused.
- Admittedly, church has never been a fair place. We have fought like crazy over mysteries we never will know. We have killed one another over one word in a creed. But to officially enshrine a non-consequential category such as “religious liberty” is exactly pride going before a fall.

b. In conferences where civil law permits a pastor to perform same-sex marriage services, no clergy shall at any time be required or compelled to perform, or prohibited from performing, any marriage, union, or blessing of same-sex couples, or

of any couples.

- Again and again, we hear about same-sex marriage being the stimulus for legislating local discrimination.
- Unfortunately, if it is not recognized and commented upon every time, it provides an opening for “religious liberty” to give permission for clergy to be so unprofessional that they will abdicate the well-attested markers of marriage (“love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity”) in favor of a personal bias against LGBTQ+ persons and G*D’s good gift of sexuality extended beyond heterosexuality.

c. Clergy who cannot in good conscience continue to serve in a conference based upon that conference’s standards for ordination regarding practicing homosexuals, may seek to transfer under ¶ 347, and shall be supported and assisted in that process. Similarly, clergy who cannot in good conscience continue to serve a particular church based on unresolved disagreements over same-sex marriage as communicated by the pastor and Staff-Parish Relations Committee to the district superintendent, shall be reassigned. All clergy with security of appointment shall continue under appointment by the bishop of the annual conference.

- What tangled webs eventually get laid down when a first deception is put forward and adopted.
- Putting the appointment cart before the horse is but one of the outcomes of an initial lie about LGBTQ+ persons—that they are “incompatible” with Jesus.
- This petition commits The United Methodist Church to use variations within human sexuality to sort clergy, congregations, and conferences into homogenous and competing units—each with their own practice of acceptance or rejection of LGBTQ+ persons.
- The United Methodist Church so desires this outcome that it will even pay for people to be moved around so they can be comforted in a setting of like-minds/hearts. The only question in quadrennia to come is what other issues will arise for which this is the blueprint of how to privilege the most dogmatic amongst us.

This petition about responsibilities of the clergy turns out to be the reverse—the responsibility of The United Methodist Church is to take care of the conscience of its clergy by moving them where they want to go.

There is no accountability to the denomination to follow the General Rule to “first, do no harm.” All that is needed is a statement that they don’t agree with the “stance” of their local situation, and off they go. A bruised doctrinal bone is all that is needed to trigger a move to greener pastures.

Though begun in a neutral tone, this petition is really about those who “do not condone” LGBTQ+ persons in marriage or as ordainable.

One Church Plan #9

Unauthorized Conduct – Par. 341.6

There is no corresponding legislation in the One Church Plan directing local churches to have a process whereby they might come to a decision about same-sex marriage on church property. Without such being added, this petition keeps a little secret that clergy can pull out to deny LGBTQ+ persons from being married. “Golly, this church hasn’t voted on a policy for you to get married, so—No!”

Amend ¶ 341.6 as follows:

6. Ceremonies that celebrate ~~homosexual unions~~ same-sex marriage shall not be performed ~~conducted by clergy or ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches~~ on church-owned property unless the church decides by a majority vote of a Church Conference to adopt a policy to celebrate same-sex marriage on church property.

- This petition throws the whole denominational debate back to a local congregation with no anticipated help to develop a policy. Not to help prepare congregations for a decision about marriage is just lousy process and a set-up for failure. It takes years to become a Reconciling Congregation where this decision would be a matter of no consequence.
- We are taking the denominational angst and thrusting it upon a local congregation where decisions really do make a practical difference. It can be expected that this little clergy-first, congregation-second process will lead to more rancor and division.
- There will be continuing pain for LGBTQ+ persons and their families even in a helpful process as they are re-traumatized by being debated about in their local setting. To have no process nearly guarantees unnecessary hurt.

I would hope delegates would spend the time to come up with an additional petition that may be attached somewhere such as ¶204. *Care of Members*. A starting proposal is:

Amend ¶204 through addition of a concluding paragraph:

Each local church shall have a statement affirming or denying same-sex marriage on church property by 2024. It is recommended that a

process be used for making such a decision that is developed by a joint effort of the General Board of Church and Society and the General Board of Discipleship Ministries.

Of course, this will cost money, but this discrimination has already cost millions of dollars and the lives of too many members. Obviously, still another petition would have to be developed to put this work in the respective Boards. Savvy delegates can figure out how to do this.

A local method-less congregational approach is likely to default to the limitation of the loudest of those who “do not condone” LGBTQ+ persons being married or a clergyperson who would do so. It is patently unfair for General Conference to pass its own 46-year history of avoidance down the line to annual conferences, districts, and congregations.

One Church Plan #10
Ordination by Bishops – Par. 415.6

Ahh, a bishop’s conscience! What a wonder to behold.

Bishops are quick to claim they are “bishops of the whole church.” This allows them to look away when a difficulty comes up and abrogate their prophetic function in the face of potential financial loss (expressed as loss of members) if they were to make a theological determination that the weight of G*D’s Love was actually on one side or the other.

Bishops want to be bishops of the whole church, except in one particular situation where they can carve out a purity exception for themselves and exempt them from expressing explicit pastoral support for LGBTQ+ persons. Such purity does not keep moral injury at bay.

Bishops who would use this out from their responsibilities and keep the tension over LGBTQ+ persons at the highest possible level might consider the advice they would give to a current LGBTQ+ clergy person who came out of the dungeon constructed by the church for them—resign. Resignation would help keep them from being a wimpy bishop (one who won’t ordain but will appoint, have power over).

Amend ¶ 415.6 at its conclusion as follows:

No bishop shall be required to ordain an elder or deacon, commission a deaconess, home missionary, or missionary, or license a local pastor who is a self-avowed practicing homosexual. The jurisdictional College of Bishops shall provide for the ordination, commissioning, and licensing of all persons recommended by the Board of Ordained Ministry and the clergy session of the annual conference in the bounds of its jurisdiction. All clergy with security of appointment shall continue under appointment by the bishop of the annual conference.

- A hired-gun bishop can be brought in to do the ordaining of a clergy person who happens also to be a LGBTQ+ person, but it is the bishop who “does not condone” LGBTQ+ ordinands who will be expected to appoint them and be their pastoral leader. Seems unworkable.
- This petition brings back in what Petition 4 just removed—language about “self-avowed practicing homosexual”. It is a cancer that grows while justifying to itself that it is more important to the body than any other part. It shows no growth of understanding of orientation.

- Deletion of this petition might help bishops grow up and actually be a bishop of a church that contains LGBTQ+ persons, being at least as considerate of them as the bishops have been of those who “do not condone” LGBTQ+ persons.

One Church Plan #11

Responsibilities of Bishops – Par. 416

While it is good to see the limits of bishops specified regarding what is otherwise guarded by other parts of the *Discipline*, it seems strange that bishops would need to be reminded of the rights of clergy regarding officiating at a marriage and the inappropriateness of interfering with that. Delegates may want to add other “Duh!” statements to the end of the other sections of ¶¶414–416.

Amend ¶ 416 by adding new sub-paragraphs after 416.7:

8. The bishop shall neither require any pastor to perform nor prohibit any pastor from performing any marriage, union, or blessing of same-sex couples.

9. The bishop shall neither require any church to hold nor prohibit any church from holding a same-sex marriage service on church property.

- What a difference it would be if this petition were not phrased in relation to same-sex marriage but present disciplinary language. It might run something like this

The bishop shall neither require any pastor to perform nor prohibit any pastor from performing any marriage, union, or blessing that gives evidence of love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity.
- In its present form, this petition is evidence of our current fixation upon “same-sex.” Someday we may come to a new acronym—LGBTQH+ where H=heterosexual—on our way to getting rid of such an awkward way to say simply, “All people.”
- Imagine this approach being applied to the bishops with an amendment of ¶414.3—

The church shall neither require any bishop nor prohibit any bishop from guarding, transmitting, teaching, and proclaiming, corporately and individually, the apostolic faith as it is expressed in Scripture and tradition, and, as they are led and endowed by the Spirit, to interpret that faith evangelically and prophetically.
- Silly. Right?

One Church Plan #12

Responsibilities of District Superintendents – Par. 419

This is a repeat of Petition 11 but focused on those who oversee clergy and congregations on behalf of a bishop. This is a logical extension of the previous petition but, again, not needed if District Superintendents knew the relevant parts of the *Discipline*.

Amend ¶ 419 by adding new sub-paragraphs after 419.12:

13. The superintendent shall neither require any pastor to perform nor prohibit any pastor from performing any marriage, union, or blessing of same-sex couples.

14. The superintendent shall neither require any church to hold nor prohibit any church from holding a same-sex marriage service on church property or otherwise coerce, threaten, or retaliate against any pastor who exercises his or her conscience to perform or refuse to perform a same-sex marriage.

- Both petitions 11 and 12 are already covered by other parts of the *Discipline* and, in the context of this specially-called General Conference, only serve to excuse those who “do not condone” non-heterosexual marriages from their pastoral duty of identifying and rejoicing in relationships of love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity.

One Church Plan #13

Business of the Conference – Par. 605

It is funny to watch the church attempt to schedule Grace, Mercy, and Justice. Generally, we don't bind future decisions by a present one because we have noticed that G*D works on a different timeline than ours. It's hard enough to keep up with where G*D has been, much less where G*D now is. This petition authorizes a freezing of wisdom for 30 months—and by 30 months we mean 3 years because of annual meeting schedules.

Amend ¶ 605 by adding new sub-paragraph after 605.9 as follows:

10. At any clergy session of an annual conference, the chairperson of the Board of Ordained Ministry shall, if directed by a vote of the Board of Ordained Ministry, present a motion regarding certification, ordination, and appointment of self-avowed practicing homosexuals. Provided, however, that any clergy session of an annual conference that votes on such matters shall not, without the consent of the presiding bishop, take up any subsequent motion on that issue during any called or special session of annual conference held within 30 full calendar months from the date of such vote regardless of the outcome.

- If General Conference should remove the “incompatibility” clause from the *Book of Discipline*, the only reason to have a motion such as this is to direct the Board of Ordained Ministry not to accept any LGBTQ+ candidates.
- If this passes, an annual conference will be able to return us to the position we are currently in, deciding for G*D which category of people is not eligible to receive the call and gifts and graces for ordained ministry.
- This petition falls into the speaking-out-of-both-sides-of-our-mouth. Of course, that is something The United Methodist Church has excelled in ever since the “incompatibility” clause passed. Case in point are these two back-to-back sentences in ¶ 161.f:

The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God's grace is available to anyone.

- This petition effectively returns the “incompatibility” clause to annual conferences after it has been removed from General Conference

documents. In so doing it repeats the intent of Jim Crow laws in a new setting. This is what local option means—pockets of discrimination in congregations, districts, and annual conferences. Wherever a majority can do an end-run around the absence of formal approbation of LGBTQ+ persons—the infection of “incompatibility” is reestablished.

One Church Plan #14
Chargeable Offenses – Par. 2702.1

It is important to wonder about the significance of adding a code word to marriage—monogamous. I’m not savvy enough to catch its importance in this attempt at unifying United Methodists around topics of human sexuality when we have such a lack of educational resources to help us hold hands as we attempt to think together. I am suspicious that those behind the “religious liberty” language are also forwarding this “monogamous” language without any rationale about its importance in the realm of human sexuality.

Amend ¶ 2702.1 as follows:

¶ 2702. 1. A bishop, clergy member of an annual conference (¶ 370), local pastor, clergy on honorable or administrative location, or diaconal minister may be tried 168 DCA Advance Edition when charged (subject to the statute of limitations in ¶ 2702.4) with one or more of the following offenses: (a) immorality including, but not limited to, not being celibate in singleness or not faithful in ~~a heterosexual a~~ monogamous marriage; (b) practices declared by The United Methodist Church to be incompatible with Christian teachings ~~including but not limited to: being a self-avowed practicing homosexual; or conducting ceremonies which celebrate homosexual unions; or performing same sex wedding ceremonies;~~ (c) crime; (d) disobedience to the order and discipline of The United Methodist Church; (e) dissemination of doctrines contrary to the established standards of doctrine of The United Methodist Church; (f) relationships and/or behavior that undermines the ministry of another pastor; (g) child abuse; (h) sexual abuse; (i) sexual misconduct including the use or possession of pornography, (j) harassment, including, but not limited to, racial and/or sexual harassment; (k) racial or gender discrimination; or (l) fiscal malfeasance.

- While pleased to see the removal of the “incompatibility” clause as an automatic path to investigation and trial, it is important to note that the whole of ¶ 2702.1.b needs to be removed. There is no accepted definition of what constitutes Christian teachings. The vagueness of “teachings” opens a door to charges based on variations of themes of human sexuality or other personal identity issues.
- Petition 3 deleted the phrase, “Christian teaching,” and here we are keeping the plural form, “Christian teachings.” If there was any confidence that this term meant an appreciation of the breadth of

Christian experience and learning from it, this might be a helpful word. However, the history of that phrase over these last 40+ years is one of searching the history of Christianity to find a detail that can be used against someone or the developing of an artificial category of persons.

- There is nothing to be gained by keeping “Christian teachings” here and only much to be lost by setting up future disruptions. Only time will tell if the delegates are willing to leave this seed of contention as a reason to charge someone.
- Dropping the word “homosexual” deals with a current specific but leaves open the creative uses of “Christian teachings” to practically have no effect on the potential trials that will be held.
- There are enough doctrinal protections present in our Constitution (Preamble and ¶¶ 1–61) and Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task (¶¶ 101–105 and Conclusion). A simple removal of ¶ 2702.1.b is in order.

One Church Plan #15
Central Conference Implementation – Par. 543.17

This is a practical petition, given the different realities of Central Conference meeting times and language translations. Would that other petitions could have the same foresight of difficulties.

Amend ¶ 543.17 as follows:

17. In a central conference or provisional central conference using a language other than English, legislation passed by a General Conference shall not take effect until ~~twelve~~ 18 months after the close of that General Conference in order to afford the necessary time to make adaptations and to publish a translation of the legislation that has been enacted . . .

- Nonetheless, it is vital that this petition is defeated.
- Left as is means there will not be an experience of the decisions of 2019 until after a next General Conference in 2020. Already, the current 12-month boundary means there will only be two or three months to experience the decisions made in 2019 before being pushed to look at their early results and make adjustments in 2020.

One Church Plan #16
Pension Liabilities - Par. 1504

The Commission on a Way Forward was formed to heal an internal divide regarding human sexuality. The first 15 petitions were about moving on from being held back by a fifty-year-old understanding of sexuality that there is only heterosexuality and aberrations from it.

Early on the bishops shifted from Human Sexuality to an emphasis upon “Unity.” Here we move into unity issues and find that they are really about pensions, not theologically grounded in relationships with G*D and Neighb*rs.

Amend ¶ 1504, effective as of the close of the 2019 General Conference, by adding a new subparagraph 23 to read as follows:

If a local church or charge in the United States changes its relationship to The United Methodist Church through closure, abandonment, or release from the trust clause pursuant to ¶ 2548, ¶ 2549, or otherwise, notwithstanding whether property with title held by the local church is subject to the trust (under the terms of ¶ 2501), the local church shall contribute a withdrawal liability in an amount equal to its pro rata share of any aggregate unfunded pension obligations to the annual conference. The General Board of Pension and Health Benefits shall determine the aggregate funding obligations of the annual conference using market factors similar to a commercial annuity provider, from which the annual conference will determine the local church’s share.

- We now know the value of the “trust clause”—the market value of commercial annuities.
- This indicates we stay together for financial, not theological, reasons. This is our bottom-line. This is as close as we will get to selling our possessions and giving the proceeds to the poor (Mark 10:17–27).
- This petition is driven by the possibility of removing the “incompatibility” clause.
- Language about “or otherwise...” refers to churches removing themselves from the denomination in reaction to removal of official support for their desire to “not condone” marriage and ordination of LGBTQ+ persons.
- It is best for delegates to amend this petition with specific language limiting the time of this particular scheme of a “pro rata share” to some

limited amount of years—perhaps 4 years. After a quadrennium, everyone would be expected to remain under the traditional trust clause.

- Leaving an open-ended process for a United Methodist congregation to leave invites other reasons for discontent to pop-up and to cause unnecessary periodic angst over one pet prejudice or another. This needs additional clarification.

One Church Plan #17
CRSP Amendment - Par. 1504

If nothing else of the One Church Plan passes, this petition will likely do so. It appeals to our desire for security this side of heaven. The function here is to “secure and protect” the United Methodist Pension Benefits from “future disruptions.” We will allow harm to LGBTQ+ persons, but not to our financial assets.

Revise the Clergy Retirement Security Program (“CRSP”), which is incorporated by reference in ¶ 1504.1 of the Book of Discipline, including any needed revisions to CRSP section numbering, formatting, pagination, or Table of Contents, effective as of the close of the 2019 General Conference as follows:

The General Board of Pension and Health Benefits is directed by the General Conference to amend the Clergy Retirement Security Program such that active clergy participants who terminate their annual conference relationship under ¶ 360 of the Book of Discipline will be treated as terminated vested participants under the Clergy Retirement Security Program. The terminated vested participant’s accrued pension benefits shall be secured and protected from future disruptions by converting such benefits to an actuarially equivalent account balance, using Proposed Legislation factors corresponding to those used when determining annual conference plan sponsor contributions to the Clergy Retirement Security Program. Such converted benefits, along with all other retirement account balances, shall be transferred to the United Methodist Personal Investment Plan, a voluntary defined contribution plan maintained by the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits under ¶ 1504.2. The General Board of Pension and Health Benefits is directed, authorized, and empowered to amend the Clergy Retirement Security Program, effective as of the close of the 2019 General Conference and in the manner described above.

- These last two petitions that indicate the bottom-line of the One Church Plan is financial. Read the specificity here, the judgments being made about what is of value, and how far we are willing to go to protect our finances.
- Read the first 15 petitions again—how confusing and contradictory they are; how little protection they give LGBTQ+ persons if a claim of “religious liberty” is made; and how much permission they give to those who “do not condone” LGBTQ+ persons to discriminate against them in their local setting.

Conclusion

The fault of the One Church Plan can be found in its intent: “The One Church Plan gives churches the room they need to maximize the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible.”

“Maximizing” has been done on the backs of LGBTQ+ persons.

We need to affirm:

- LGBTQ+ persons are created in the image of an imageless G*D
- participate in relationships that exemplify love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity, and
- receive the call, gifts, and graces needed for ordination.

However, measured against the tender conscience of those who need to be wrapped in “religious liberty,” the One Church Plan capitulates.

It seems we will do anything to keep from making a clear affirmation that G*D graces and welcomes a variety of ways of being human. Such a declaration will require the humility to confess the church has been wrong, once again, and to intentionally set about the business of repentance and reparations rather than retreat into silence.

Only an affirmation of the length, breadth, and height of G*D’s presence will bring a witness that will ring true at General Conference 2019.

Prayer

May Love prevail in The United Methodist Church. Amen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wesley White is a retired clergy person who has been a delegate to several General Conferences and more Jurisdictional Conferences. He has also edited the MFSA daily *Social Questions Bulletin* at General Conference 1998. Most pertinently, Wesley is a member of Love Prevails that has done direct action to encourage the removal of the “incompatibility” clause and had regular critiques of the Commission on A Way Forward and the results of its work, including the One Church Plan.

Though Wesley is a member of Love Prevails, this is not a statement by Love Prevails. The mission of Love Prevails is larger than legislation. This critique is his own response to the One Church Plan that will authorize and permit a local option to keep the “incompatibility” clause in effect for marriage and ordination of LGBTQ+ persons if a majority in a particular setting should decide to do so.

Other books by Wesley are available on Amazon:

Comments on each scripture passage in the Revised Common Lectionary:

[*Wresting Year A: Connecting Sunday Readings with Lived Experience*](#)

[*Wresting Year B: Connecting Sunday Readings with Lived Experience*](#)

[*Wresting Year C: Connecting Sunday Readings with Lived Experience*](#)

A translation and reformatting of the Gospel of Mark:

[*Slow-Reading the Gospel of Mark*](#)