

DISCERNMENT PERIOD INFORMATION MEETINGS

1 BRIEF UNITED METHODIST HISTORY AND HOW WE GOT HERE

PRAYER

INTRO

The UMC has serious problems,

with not only biblical and theological differences regarding sexual morality
(and some much more significant biblical and theological issues)
but with ongoing disobedience against our Book of Discipline, our church law book,
and no one enforcing the rules of the UMC.
It has become chaotic and ugly.

Some congregations, bishops, pastors and members have already left the UMC.

More than a few individuals, pastors, and congregations are considering leaving UMC.
I know of at over 50 congregations in our Annual Conference alone
that have started this process of disaffiliation.
There are numerous others giving it serious consideration.

Before NWHills makes any decision about future alignments,

I want you to have every opportunity to be well-informed.

And I want you to have opportunities to ask questions.

If you're joining us via YouTube,
type your questions into the chat stream or email me at the church.

If you're live here in the sanctuary,
we'll have time at the end for you to ask questions.

You will not be visible or audible on the YouTube stream.

I'll repeat your question and do my best to provide an answer.

And if you'd rather be able to keep it more anonymous,
you too can email me.

When I address your question, I will not use your name.

Keep in mind, too, that this will remain on our YouTube channel.

So you can refer others to it, or send them a link via email or text,
any time in the future.

But before we go into the details of what's going on, I want to be very upfront about where I'm coming from.

I am a dyed-in-the-wool Methodist.

You can't get much more Methodist than me.

My grandparents told me there were Methodists in our family going way back in my family tree.

My grandparents on my dad's side were Methodist.

My dad was Methodist.

When my dad left the US Army and we returned to the states,

I was baptized at the age of 2 in Central Methodist Church in Brownwood, TX.

I was raised in the Methodist and then United Methodist Church.

I was confirmed into full membership in the UMC.

I went to Sunday school and worship,

participated in the United Methodist Youth Fellowship (UMYF), sang in the youth choir.

If the church doors were unlocked, we were there.

I learned some Bible, learned to pray, and started seeking after God,
because of seeds sown into me by the people of the UMC.

I attended a United Methodist university for my bachelor's degree

and a UM seminary for my master's degree.
 I was licensed as a local pastor,
 then ordained as a deacon,
 and then ordained as an elder in the UMC.
 I've served as a pastor for 41 years in the UMC.
 I have served on district level committees for over 20 years.
 The UMC has been my home for almost all of my life.
 So the idea of the UMC coming apart, the idea of *leaving* the UMC, brings me no joy.
 It brings tears and a heavy heart.
 But here we are.
 And I am convinced that it is my responsibility to lay before you the facts,
 so that you can make an informed decision about the future of NWHills
 and our relationship with the UMC.

RECENT UM HISTORY

1968 The UMC was formed by a merger of the Evangelical United Brethren and the Methodist Church.

We were established as something like the federal government,
 with elected representatives (called delegates) at every level of the denomination,
 half clergy and half laity.

The top level of our structure is the General Conference,
 which meets every four years,
 with lay and clergy representation from around the world.
 Of the mainline denominations,
 we are the only one that is truly global in nature.

The decisions of the General Conference are the official word of the UMC,
 and are published in a book called The Book of Discipline.
 This is our denominational law book.

The organizational structures adopted at that General Conference indicates that
 enforcement of church law takes place only within the bounds of the Annual Conference,
 a regional conference.

Our Annual Conference is called the Rio Texas Conference.

If a pastor breaks the rules, they can be brought up on charges.

Their treatment from then on is dependent on the bishop processing the complaint and
 referring it to a judicial inquiry and perhaps a trial.

If the clergy of an Annual Conference are predominantly liberal
 and join in rebelling against the rules of the church,
 there will be no enforcement of the rules.

But at that the time of our formative General Conference,
 no one foresaw the trouble this would bring.

1972 General Conference adopted our first Social Principles.

The Social Principles says.

“The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth.” (Article 1V)

BUT... “The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.”

(known as the Hand Amendment)

Even then, this was a contentious issue,

with some church leaders advocating for a progressive stance.

It was believed that this sentence would be a sufficient statement.

It was not.

It was not long before an openly homosexual man was ordained in the church.

And then a few others.

And same-sex ceremonies were performed.

They were not yet legally considered “weddings,”
but the ceremonies celebrated and consecrated same-sex relationships.

So, later General Conferences included *explicit* prohibitions against same-sex ceremonies and certifying, licensing or ordaining self-avowed practicing homosexuals. That language is very important.

They included the term “self-avowed”
to preclude people going on witch hunts to identify homosexuals.
It must be a matter of self-revealing, telling a UM official.

They included “practicing” because they wanted to keep the focus on behaviors,
not on sexual attraction that is not acted on.

So, technically, a homosexual who is celibate and intends to remain celibate
can be certified as a candidate, licensed, or ordained.

Here is the language in the Book of Discipline:

“The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.
Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates,
ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.”
*“Self-avowed practicing homosexual is understood to mean that a person
openly acknowledges to a bishop, district superintendent,
district committee of ordained ministry, board of ordained ministry,
or clergy session that the person is a practicing homosexual.”* (para.304.3)
“Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers
and shall not be conducted in our churches.” (Para.341.6)

Please note:

None of this is about the value or worth of the individual person;
It simply identifies certain behavior as sinful.

None of this is about membership in the UMC.

It is about ordination and wedding ceremonies.

There is no church law prohibiting a self-avowed practicing homosexual
from joining a UMC.

None of this suggests we should not be loving toward homosexual persons.

On the contrary, we are to be Christ-like toward them and everyone else.

There is even language urging families to not turn their backs on
family members who come out as homosexual.

Though United Methodist church law was and is clear,
the numbers grew of

pastors performing same-sex ceremonies and

Annual Conferences certifying, licensing and ordaining self-avowed practicing homosexuals.

Progressives who are breaking church law insist they were following a higher law,
in pursuit of God’s all-embracing love and justice.

2016 General Conference almost saw a church split right on the floor of the conference.

It was averted by establishing the Commission on the Way Forward,
a team which was to develop one or more plans for how the UMC could move forward.

2016 Immediately after the GC,

the Western Jurisdiction elected Karen Oliveto as bishop.

She is an openly married lesbian.

Her annual conference broke church law

when they approved her as a candidate for ordained ministry
 and when they ordained her.
 And now the entire jurisdiction, in intentional defiance of the GC,
 broke church law by electing and consecrating her as bishop.
 A pastor brought charges against her,
 but nothing has been done with that.
 She is still serving as bishop,
 because the entire Western Jurisdiction refuses to enforce the rules.

The Commission on the Way Forward developed three plans:
 the One Church Plan, the Connectional Conference Plan, and the Traditional Plan.
 The Council of Bishops rejected the Traditional Plan out of hand,
 and put their efforts into developing legislative language for the One Church Plan,
 and pushing for its adoption.
 Our own Bishop Schnase was a central figure in writing it up.
 The One Church Plan would allow every annual conference to
 decide how they would deal with homosexuality.
 If a congregation differed with the decision of their annual conference,
 a congregational vote would enable them to
 affiliate with a different annual conference.
 If a pastor differed with the decision of the conference,
 they could affiliate with a different conference.
 Pressure came to bear on the Council of Bishops,
 and the Traditional Plan was revived and put into legislative language.

2019 saw a special called General Conference ONLY for consideration of the plans brought by
 the Commission on the Way Forward.
 I attended as a prayerful observer,
 because I believed this might be a turning point.
 It was in St. Louis, very cold,
 and marked by outdoor protesters from Westboro Baptist Church,
 which is basically an anti-homosexual hate group,
 and indoor protests by progressives wearing rainbow stoles.
 The debates were ugly,
 with dark insinuations that people of opposing views were
 evil, homophobic, ignorant, and such.
 There were significant efforts,
 manipulating Robert's Rules of Order to slow the work of the conference,
 with numerous amendments, questions, point of order, and more,
 to try to keep the conference from reaching any conclusion
 during the time we had the use of the facility.
 The One Church Plan was brought up first,
 and soundly rejected by the delegates.
 The bishops were in shock.
 This is not at all what they expected.
 Which suggests just how badly they are out of touch with the church.
 The Traditional Plan was *narrowly* approved.
 It maintained the current language regarding
 sexual morality, wedding ceremonies and ordination,
 and provided some stronger enforcement mechanisms.
 But it did not cure our inability to enforce the rules
 beyond the bounds of the Annual Conference.

So a progressive region still can act in defiance of church law.
 One other important change was made at the General Conference.

A new provision was given, para 2553,
 providing a way for congregations to disaffiliate from the UMC,
 requiring they first finish paying that year's apportionments,
 pay the next year's apportionments
 (as a way to protect annual conferences from
 the financial shock of disaffiliations),
 and pray their portion of the Annual Conference's unfunded pension liability.
 That is how much the pension fund would need to meet its obligations
 if the economy totally collapsed.

This was a significant change,
 because it circumvented the "trust clause" of the UMC.
 Our trust clause says the local church does not truly own their property,
 but they hold it "in trust" for the Annual Conference and denomination.
 So if a congregation wanted to leave the UMC,
 their Annual Conference could require them to pay
 up to 100% of their property value...
 or not allow them to take their property at all.

The new Para 2553 was intended as a gracious way to
 allow *progressive* congregations to leave the UMC
 if they could not live within the UMC under the *Traditional Plan*.

At the conclusion of the GC meeting, the entire delegation from the Western Jurisdiction stood together,
 and a leading woman pastor spoke.

She was a classmate of mine in seminary. (Donna Lowman)
 She announced that the Western Jurisdiction would not abide by the Traditional Plan,
 but intended to be "fully inclusive" of homosexuals,
 doing same-sex wedding ceremonies and ordaining self-avowed practicing homosexuals.
 While it was a powerful word of defiance in the face of the conference,
 those were, in fact, things they were already doing.

Rather than abide by the will of the General Conference and the law of the church,
 progressive pastors and bishops began a massive campaign of disobedience.

And not just in the Western Jurisdiction,
 but in all the areas of the US you would probably identify as "liberal."
 Out of our 53 annual conferences in the US,
 26 annual conferences have publicly repudiated the official stance of the UMC.
 12 annual conferences have publicly announced
 they will not abide by the rules of the UMC.
 And the UM Book of Discipline offers no functional way to hold any of them accountable.

Traditionalists decided there was no sense in continuing this fight to try to reform the UMC.

It's now been going on for 44 years, and things have only gotten worse.
 More and more people began to accept the idea that it might be better to leave the UMC.
 The bishop of Sierra Leon invited together a group of traditionalists to talk about developing
 a plan for an amicable separation of the church.
 Some progressive leaders joined them.
 They ended up with a team that came from all sides,
 from the very conservative to the extremely progressive.
 With the help of one of the world's leading professional arbitrators,
 they developed a plan called
 "The Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation."

It's usually referred to as The Protocol.
 It would allow each Annual Conference to vote on
 whether they would remain UM or move to a
 new conservative Wesleyan denomination that was yet to be formed.
 If a congregation or pastor differed with the decision of the Annual Conference,
 they could separate and go the other way.
 Pastors of both denominations would
 see their pensions in one plan shared by both denominations.
 The plan was for the Protocol to be voted on at the General Conference in 2020,
 and because of it being developed advocated for by groups from the left and the right,
 it seemed to have a very good chance of passing.
 Many people began to pin their hopes on this plan.
 The traditionalists then began preparing for the launch of a new denomination.
 (That became the Global Methodist Church.)

2020 General Conference was postponed to 2021 due to COVID.

2021 GC was postponed to 2022 due to COVID.

2022 GC was postponed to 2024.

This time *two* reasons for postponement given by the Commission on General Conference:

- 1) COVID, and too many delegates without vaccination
- 2) Visas, too many international delegates could not get Visas.

One member of the Commission resigned from the commission,
 and wrote a scathing article stating that he resigned because
 the commission had intentionally postponed the GC for the purpose of
 not letting the Protocol be passed.

He insisted none of their given reasons were true.

The Commission had not sent invitation letters to overseas delegates,
 so that slowed their visa applications.

Even so, African delegate leaders said
 most of them had visas in hand or would very shortly have them.

Regarding vaccination status:

Most countries were requiring vaccination of travelers.

But most of the foreign delegates were already vaccinated.

Those who were not mostly had appointments lined up.

Several conservative caucus groups had
 raised money to help delegates get vaccinated.

They sought help from the General Church
 and from progressive caucuses,

but they all refused to put any money or help into that effort.

They did not have any interest in the conservative African delegates
 being present at the General Conference.

It seemed as if some people on the Commission on General Conference
 were deliberately working to sabotage things,
 so the GC could not meet and the Protocol could not be passed.

Once the 2022 General Conference was postponed until the regularly scheduled date of 2024,
 the traditionalists decided to launch the new denomination they'd been preparing.

On May 1 of this year the Global Methodist Church was open, began receiving congregations and pastors.

The first issue for a congregation to consider is whether to disaffiliate from the UMC.

We can make use of para 2553 to do so.

We need to consider this *now*, because para 2553 has a sunset date of Dec.31, 2023.

The second issue for a congregation to consider is whether to be an independent church, or affiliate with some other denomination.

One of the possibilities is the new Global Methodist Church.

It is not the *only* possibility, but a good one.

If you'd like to learn more about it, go to: globalmethodist.org.

There are other denominations that are related to Methodists that could be considered:

Nazarene, Wesleyan, Free Methodist, and more.

But making that decision is for another day.

Today was just about understanding the course of events that brought us to this time.

Our process is this:

On July 25 the Admin Council voted to bring this to the full membership of NWHills for consideration.

The Rio Texas Annual Conference requires us to have a 6 month period of discernment.

That is where we are now.

At the end of that 6 months,

we will hold a special called church conference,

at which time every full member of NWHills will have

the right and responsibility to cast their vote regarding

whether NWHills will disaffiliate from the UMC.

Disaffiliation requires a 2/3 majority vote.

If the vote is to disaffiliate, then we will move immediately to consider

going independent or affiliating with another denomination.

Our disaffiliation must then be approved by a majority vote of

the pastors and delegates of the Rio Texas Annual Conference.

That meeting will be in June 2023.

If we receive a 50% + 1 vote, then we can affiliate with another denomination.

If we choose to go to the Global Methodist Church,

our members must vote to be in agreement with

the Book of Doctrines and Disciplines of the Global Methodist Church,

put in our formal application,

and be approved for membership by the Transitional Council of the GMC.

I do need to add that this is not just about homosexuality.

That is what counselors would call "the presenting issue."

When someone comes in for counseling,

the first thing they present as "the main thing" is most often *not* the main thing.

The real thing is something *deeper*.

And that's what the counselor has to go digging for.

Well, the issue of homosexuality is the *presenting* issue for the UMC.

The real thing is actually significantly more important.

At a deeper level, there is the issue of what we believe the Bible is.

What does it mean to say the Bible is "divinely inspired"?

What is the level of dependability and accuracy that we can expect from the Bible?

What is the authority of this book?

We will deal with that in detail in a later session.

Another level of this controversy has to do with the *structure* of the UMC.

We have rules and laws about

how the UMC is *supposed* to work and what we are *supposed* to believe.

But we do not have sufficient *enforcement* mechanisms.

That has shown up in the areas of

who we can ordain and who's wedding ceremonies we will perform.

But it has also long been an issue regarding what is *taught and preached* in our churches.

We have pastors and bishops who preach and teach

what the historic church would have labeled *heresy*.

I'll describe some of those heresies in a few weeks.

In the UMC the mechanisms for enforcing the rules and laws of the church are insufficient.

If you are in a region where most clergy are in disagreement with the Book of Discipline, it will *not* be enforced.

Conservatives are concerned about that because

they find themselves *publicly associated* with doctrines and behaviors with which they *strongly disagree*.

They are also concerned about that because

the *most liberal* regions of the church do not have the financial ability to pay for *their own bishops and bureaucracy*.

The conservative regions of the church are, in effect,

subsidizing the more liberal regions with their apportionments.

Finally, conservatives are concerned about this breaking of the rules of the church because it creates *increasing distrust* among clergy.

When we are ordained, we promised to

preach and teach the doctrines of the church and uphold the order of the church.

But those promises are not being kept.

So, on what basis can we *trust* one another?

Progressive pastors and bishops justify their actions by

an appeal to some human experience being more authoritative than a literal reading of the Bible,

an appeal to *individual conscience* being more important than *church rules*,

and their pursuit of *justice* being like

acts civil disobedience during the civil rights movement.

So, in truth, while the presenting issue is about

who we can ordain and whose wedding ceremonies we can preside at,

the real issue is much deeper and wider.

The United Methodist Church is anything but united.

Our future sessions will be:

1 A BRIEF UNITED METHODIST HISTORY AND HOW WE GOT HERE

2 BIBLICAL STUDY OF "THE HOT BUTTON ISSUE"

3 SCRIPTURE: DIVINELY INSPIRED, DEPENDABLE, AUTHORITATIVE?

4 IS IT JUST ABOUT SEXUALITY?

5 WHAT WILL THEY THINK IF WE SEPARATE? IF WE DO NOT?

I'll provide time each week for questions and answers.

If you're joining us by YouTube, you can post your questions in the chat stream.

We might get to them tonight,

or perhaps in a future session where they better fit.

Q&A

Next week we'll start studying the scriptures related to "the hot button issue" of sexual morality.

HOMEWORK

Read in various translations: (Biblegateway.com)

Genesis 19:1-29; Leviticus 18; 20; Romans 1:18-25; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:9-11