
5 WHAT WILL THEY THINK IF WE SEPARATE?

PRAYER

One of the concerns I've heard raised,
and it is worth considering,
is this:

What will other people think of us if we disaffiliate over this?
They might think we are hateful, bigoted, homophobic.
I can hear them calling us ridge, judgmental Pharisees.

No one wants to be called those things.

That sort of labeling would certainly be a black eye for Northwest Hills.

But does the outside society know what the United Methodist Church *currently* stands for?

In fact, I believe the discussion is not really about
whether we would leave the United Methodist Church.

The United Methodist Church has already left us.

Northwest Hills has always lived by the standards set in the Book of Discipline.

The current Book of Discipline, our denominational law book,
says, and has said for a number of years, that

“the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.”

The UMC is already prohibited from ordaining and appointing as pastors
people who are “self-avowed practicing homosexuals.”

UM pastors are already prohibited from performing wedding ceremonies for same-sex couples,
and our congregations are prohibited from hosting such ceremonies.

NWHills has operated within those boundaries for as long as it has existed.

And, if we disaffiliate from the UMC,

we will continue to live and minister by those same standards in the future.

The difference will be,

NWHills will no longer be institutionally associated with
bishops, annual conferences, pastors, and churches that break those rules.

And we won't be paying for them with our apportionment dollars.

Apportionments are moneys every UM congregation pays out
to cover the costs of bishops and their staffs,
district superintendents and their staffs,
a large denominational bureaucracy,
and all the ministry that goes on beyond the local church.

We currently pay about 10% of our annual budget,
or just over \$100,000.

If we disaffiliate, we will no longer be paying for people doing things that are
contrary to the stated and published standards of the church, and,
to my way of thinking, contrary to scripture.

And NWHills will not have to worry about
receiving a new pastor who would break those rules.

Sometimes the question is framed to suggest

a church that wants to grow and attract young people in today's world
must accommodate itself to the changing mores of today's world.

To which I would simply say two things:

- 1) Our God-given call is not to reflect the world.
It is to reflect God to the world.
- 2) The history of other denominations who have made that accommodation reveals that

changing with the time is not the way to reach people and grow.

The PCUSA in 2013 affirmed actively homosexual clergy.

They have lost 500,000 members, a decline of 1/3.

The ELCA in 2009 altered their formerly traditional stance on sexuality.

They have lost more than 1 million members, a decline of about 1/4.

The ECUSA in 2003 elected an openly homosexual bishop.

They've lost over 250,000 members, a decline of about 1/4.

The Episcopal Church experienced such a serious financial crisis,
they had to sell their headquarters building.

The UMC is the only mainline denomination that

has not liberalized its official stances on sexual morality and ethics.

We pride ourselves in the fact that we are

declining slower than the other mainline denominations.

By the way, the only reason the UMC has not liberalized its official stance is that

we are a *global* denomination,

and we have a growing representation of delegates from Africa
who uphold a traditional stance.

Without the growing representation from Africa,
our official rules would be very different.

This history suggests that accommodation to the changing sexual mores of society
is *not* a recipe for evangelism and growth.

The ancient church of the first few centuries was out of step with

the sexual mores of their time and place.

And not just the sexual mores!

And they flourished.

Not simply because their sexual morality was different,

but because their sacrificial love for others was evident.

But holding to a sexual morality that is different from the world
does not impede the church's ability to reach out.

I would suggest if the church offers nothing different from the world,
then who needs the church?

We can get whatever we want out in the world!

On the other side of that, I would say that separation from the UMC is not a recipe for growth.

And affiliating with this or that denomination

will not be a magic wand for church health and growth.

We, NWHills, will have to really be the church.

We will have to be serious about reaching out to our friends and neighbors,
offering Christ and inviting them to church events,

and showing sacrificial love to each other and to those outside the family.

We will have to be serious about developing real disciples,
real followers of Jesus who reflect his character,

who love God above all else,

who love other people with his love,

who serve the church and the world the way he did.

But our affiliation or disaffiliation with the United Methodist Church

is not going to be our downfall or the magic bullet for church health and growth.

The outside society does not know what the UMC *currently* officially stands for.

Nor do they know what NWHills has been *true* to those standards.

I doubt very seriously they will know about affiliating or disaffiliating or what it means.

One serious consideration is how we will deal with each other within the family of NWHills.

In a congregation our size,

it is very unlikely that we would take a vote regarding disaffiliation

and have a unanimous conclusion.
 There will be some people who vote one way and some who vote another way.
 Some people will feel like winners and some like losers.
 First of all, when it comes to having to make a decision such as this,
 it is painful.
 For many of us, this goes deep.
 I don't think of this as winners and losers,
 but simply trying to do the right thing for the right reason,
 each of us doing our best to discern the will of God and then doing it.
 If the vote goes your way,
 I hope and pray there will not be any gloating, celebrations and high fives.
 If the vote does not go your way,
 I hope and pray you will not get upset and leave,
 or, worse, stay and try to stir up discontent.
 We are brothers and sisters in Christ.
 We are friends.
 We are family.
 We have worshiped together, studied together, prayed together, served together,
 cried and laughed together, shared life together.
 And all of that is still true,
 even if we vote differently on the future direction of NWHills.
 We must not lose sight of that.
 Regardless of the outcome of a vote,
 we are commanded by Christ to "love one another."

To be open and honest about it,
 if the members of NWHills decide to disaffiliate we may hear *other United Methodists* say this is hateful.
 Hateful, homophobic, bigoted, narrow-minded, whatever.
 There has been a lot of ugliness expressed in some places during the course of this controversy.
 I am thankful that hasn't been the case here.
 But in some places it's been really bad.

It is really important that we

- 1) Do our best to make our decision seeking after the will of God.
- 2) Treat with respect and love those who have a different opinion about the future of NWHills.
- 3) Those who have a conservative perspective
 must have hearts of love toward people who are homosexual.
 Regardless of whether NWHills disaffiliates,
 those with a traditionalist view must have hearts of love
 toward people who are homosexual.
 We must love them and treat them the way Jesus would.

We ought to pay attention to how Jesus treated a woman who had been caught in another sexual sin.

JOHN 8:1-11

She was caught in the act.
 She was guilty as sin (pardon the pun).
 These guys were following the letter of the Law, offering her up for stoning.
 (Notice, there was no one dragging the man involved onto the scene)
 Jesus, she's a sinner, an adulteress.
 She was caught in the act.
 There are eyewitnesses.
 The law says she should be stoned.
 So....

They knew Jesus was big on forgiveness.
 But if he continued to play his one note,

he'd be contradicting God's law.
It was a chance to get him in trouble.

What did he do?

He knelt down and drew in the sand.

What was he doing?

Stalling for time?

Writing a note for her to get ready to run for her life?

Writing a list of the sins these men had committed?

Let the one among you who has no sin cast the first stone.

Ugh. To go first would be....

It's so much easier if everyone is going at the same time.

To be first means there's blood on *my* hands.

Not only that, but who is going to claim they are without sin?

No one is without sin, except God.

John says the older men dropped their stones first and walked away.

Perhaps with a little age,

they could better recognize their own sinfulness?

Eventually they all walked away.

Jesus had defended her against those who would harm her.

Then he said to her, "Neither do I condemn you.

Go and sin no more."

Go and sin no more.

He did not say, "That's not a sin.

I don't care if you do that. The Old Testament was wrong.

Go ahead. In fact, I'll bless it."

No. He did not redefine what is and is not sinful.

He did remove the penalty prescribed by the scriptures.

He defended her from those who would harm her.

And he called her to repent, to change her ways.

Go and sin no more.

The truth is, far too often homosexual people are not treated well at all,
and sometimes in the name of Jesus.

We've all heard stories of people who were threatened, beaten, even killed.

Sometimes it is more seemingly benign, just being rejected.

Parents throw out the son or daughter who just came out to them.

Friends turn away.

Hurtful words are spoken and jokes at their expense are told.

If we would follow Jesus,

we should stand against those responses.

Offer safety and friendship, the grace of Jesus, with open arms.

But that does not require us to redefine what is and is not sinful behavior.

We can name a sinful action as being sinful

without being hateful.

We can name an action sinful

and still love the person.

If your adult child lives with someone they're not married to,

if they drive while drunk,

if they cheat on their taxes,

you don't stop loving them.

You don't give approval for the behavior,

but you don't stop loving them.

Jesus loved the sinner while hating the sin.

And he calls us to follow him.

What will they think if we *do not* disaffiliate from the UMC?

Progressives helped craft and advocate for the adoption of the Protocol,
so there could be a peaceful separation into two or three denominations.

After the General Conference was postponed to 2024,
all of them have backed away from the Protocol.

Many progressives are now emphasizing the importance of the unity of the church,

They point to John's Gospel where Jesus prayed for the unity of his followers,
and many other passages that emphasize church unity.

And there are many such passages.

But, in fact, the unity scripture calls for is
not just a matter of belonging to the same institutional bureaucracy.

It is a unity of faith, of beliefs, of convictions and commitments.

And the UMC has not had that for a long time.

We are not UNITED Methodists.

We are more the UNTIED Methodist Church.

They sing, "They'll know we are Christians by our love,"

and are trying to encourage traditionalists to stay in the UMC.

They are giving reassurances that there will be room for traditionalist pastors and churches in the UMC.

They point out that it is practically impossible for them to
alter the official doctrinal standards of the UMC.

And the standards are quite orthodox.

(Conservatives point out they are standards with no teeth for enforcement.)

They say they'll let pastors and congregations practice ministry differently
with regard to ordination standards and wedding ceremonies.

(Conservatives are suspicious,

since the UMC is a connectional denomination,

where apportionment dollars are intermingled,

and pastors are frequently moved from congregation to congregation.

And these assurances are all verbal promises.

There is nothing in writing, nothing binding.)

In addition, in some parts of the country conservative pastors and congregations
already feel unwelcome.

I am glad to be able to say:

That is not the situation in our annual conference.

But in some parts of the country it is a fact that must be faced and dealt with.

Some progressive bishops make appointments that are

less than favorable to pastors and churches.

In those areas, conservatives are not invited to serve on district or conference committees.

Meanwhile, progressive pastors and congregations get all the attention.

This follows a pattern experienced in

other mainline denominations that have gone through this.

Those denominations have seen an exodus of conservative pastors,

The biggest question is not "What will others think if we do this or that?"

The only question that truly matters is "What does God want us to do?"

There is a major temptation that NWHills must resist.

That is the temptation to think making this or that decision is the finish line.

That if you choose to depart and join the Global Methodist Church,

or you choose to depart and join some other denomination or go independent,

or you choose to remain United Methodist,

that is the magic pill for NWHills to have a healthy future.

Yes, the decision before you is serious and sizeable.

But, no, it is not the finish line.

The finish line is the Kingdom of God.

And between now and then, our job is to make disciples who display Christ to the world.

A disciple is the follower of a rabbi...

one who draws nearer to Jesus all the time,
who seeks to become more like Jesus in character,
who helps make other disciples of Jesus,
and who will continue Jesus work in the world.

Q&A

PRAYER