

How We Got Here: A History of the UMC Conflict

TLUMC Town Hall Meeting

A Lesson in History

To understand how things are, you have to know how they have been

The history of the United Methodist Church is important for understanding the current situation

What we are seeing is not merely a conflict over human sexuality, but two different churches with different approaches to theology and ministry that merged in 1968 and are now finally recognizing that their differences are not sustainable

Methodism Pre-1968

18th century - Wesley, Asbury, and American Methodism; development of German pietist brand of Methodism

19th century - 1844 split in Methodist Episcopal Church over slavery, late century development of post-Enlightenment “liberal” Protestantism

20th century - 1939 reunion of Methodist Episcopal Church, ecumenical movement, desire to reconnect divergent streams of Methodism

Characteristics of 20th century ecumenical movement

Establishment of ecumenical bodies such as the Federal Council of Churches, World Council of Churches, National Council of Churches

Unions and mergers of denominations - ME North & South (1939), Evangelical & United Brethren (1946)

Driving spirit - a quest for unity

Dominant issues - church structures - how to merge with different understandings and practices regarding ordination, bishops, clergy deployment, etc.

The UMC Merger - 1968

Merger of The Methodist Church (10 million + members)
with Evangelical United Brethren (750k members)

New question: What is our coherent identity?

Dominant issues: doctrinal and moral standards

Creation of a study commission to present to first post-merger General Conference in 1972

Behind the Scenes

Major cultural upheaval in 1968

Vietnam, student protests, Civil Rights movement, sexual revolution, The Troubles in Ireland, assassinations of Robert Kennedy & Martin Luther King, Jr., Cold War - Soviet takeover of Czechoslovakia

Rise of Protestant liberalism alongside evangelical movement (Billy Graham, Jesus People)

1972 General Conference

Not a new set of doctrinal standards, but mere incorporation of both Methodist and EUB standards side by side without change

“Theological Statement” - embraced “pluralism” - open to many theological expressions and experimentation (liberation theology, feminist theology, process theology, etc.) - a “big tent” Methodism

Development of caucus Methodism - interest groups defending different aspects of theological “big tent”

Albert Outler - developed Wesleyan “quadrilateral” - Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience

Insertion of language into 1972 *Book of Discipline* about homosexual practice

In effect...

The roots of the conflict were present from the very inception of the UMC

The UMC looked more like a big tent political party holding together various constituencies rather than a church with core convictions and common mission

How do you maintain a church in which everyone disagrees with everyone else?

The cultural wind blowing against that “big tent” eventually meant that it could not hold up

1988 - Reassessment

Adoption of new theological statement that expunged “theological pluralism,” and re-emphasized the Wesleyan heritage around the primacy of Scripture

And yet, many continued to operate under the pluralistic vision of the 1972 *Discipline*, including most United Methodist seminaries and many bishops and clergy educated in those seminaries

Reaffirmed statement that “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching” - subsequent conferences added additional prohibitions against same sex marriage and ordination of practicing homosexuals

And yet, pluralistic vision caused many to reject these statements.

Late 20th century

Conflict ramps up with differing visions digging in

U.S. Methodism - regional differences

Caucuses and conflicts over LGBTQ issues, abortion, political issues

Most Boards and Agencies and Bishops skewed progressive

Provisions of *Discipline* not enforced in many segments of the church

Rise of evangelical Methodism in Global South

Mainline or Methodist?

The conflict comes to a head

Key question: Which vision will prevail?:

“Mainline” (institutional, pluralistic) or

“Methodist” (evangelical, doctrinally focused)

General Conferences from the late 20th century to present have been focused on the conflict between these two visions

Human sexuality is the presenting issue, but the conflict runs much deeper

2004 - A Proposal to Split

2004 General Conference - Rev. Bill Hinson of the Confession Movement proposes that the UMC is not sustainable, separation inevitable

Widely rejected by institutionally focused UMs

Affirmations of unity while continuing the battle

Why Breaking Up Has Been Hard to Do

Trust clause - local church property and assets held in trust by Annual Conference (regional body)

Churches cannot simply “leave” the UMC without penalty or payment

Apportionments - requirement for connectional giving of a percentage of church income

Appointments - clergy appointed to churches by a Bishop

The institutional “connectional” system has made it virtually impossible to stop the conflict, keeping combatants locked in battle

2016 - The Conflict Comes to a Breaking Point

Resistance to the UMC *Book of Discipline* ramps up - progressive bishops and clergy conduct same sex weddings in protest, Annual Conferences begin ordaining non-celibate gay clergy

Provisions about to be passed by traditional majority at 2016 General Conference to strengthen the *Discipline's* language and accountability concerning human sexuality

A coalition of large church pastors asks Council of Bishops to lead the UMC out of the impasse

Council of Bishops formed "The Commission on a Way Forward" - 32 member panel from different constituencies - to develop a plan to maintain the unity of the church in the midst of the conflict

Council of Bishops calls for a special General Conference in 2019 to vote on plans put forward by the Commission on a Way Forward

2016 - continued

After General Conference in May 2016, the Western Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church elected Karen Oliveto, a married lesbian, as Bishop in defiance of the UMC *Discipline* - she is subsequently assigned to the Rocky Mountain Conference of the UMC

October 2016 - A coalition of traditional United Methodists forms The Wesleyan Covenant Association, which seeks to either reform the current UMC or, if that was not possible, to start a new traditional Methodist denomination separate from the current United Methodist Church

2019 Special General Conference in St. Louis

Three plans brought forth by Commission on a Way Forward:

One Church Plan - remove language of current *Discipline* around human sexuality and yet allow those who disagree to continue to hold their convictions

Connectional Conference Plan - divide UMC into two (or three) different “conferences” under a general UMC umbrella

Traditional Plan - strengthen current language in UMC *Discipline* around human sexuality and add additional accountability measures for Bishops and clergy

Results of 2019 Special General Conference

One Church Plan - was preferred by Bishops and progressives - failed to make it through preliminary votes

Central Conference Plan - garnered virtually no support because it was complicated and required constitutional amendments

Traditional Plan - passed by slight majority of traditional UM delegates (53-47%) including wide support from African delegations, but accountability provisions were not passed due to time running out

Post-2019 General Conference

Progressive Annual Conferences, Bishops, and others declare statements of non-compliance and resistance to the *Book of Discipline* and the provisions of the Traditional Plan

Institutional UMs who wanted the One Church Plan join in that resistance

U.S. Annual Conferences elect more progressive delegations to the regularly scheduled 2020 General Conference in hopes of overturning the Traditional Plan

Angst and conflict over the passing of the Traditional Plan causes different groups to begin seeking a separation of the church and developing plans for that separation to be submitted to the 2020 General Conference

Post-2019 General Conference

Wesleyan Covenant Association develops a new book of Doctrines and Discipline for a potential new traditional Methodist denomination

Plans for separation submitted by various caucus group as legislation for the 2020 General Conference

Indianapolis Plan - tri-partisan participation for mutual, amicable separation

UM Next Plan - “centrist” plan to expel traditional UMs

Progressive plans - dissolve UMC and form new denominations

Another Approach

Bishop Yambasu of Sierra Leone proposes a mediated negotiation between leaders of various constituencies as a way of reaching a mutual agreement on a single plan of separation to be presented to the 2020 General Conference

Yambasu Consultation

Brought together 16 leaders from various perspectives (Centrist, Progressive, Traditional) and several bishops

Mediator designated - Kenneth Feinberg (who negotiated 9/11 Victim Fund, Deep Water Horizon, and other high profile cases) - worked pro bono

Smaller sub group met with Feinberg to hammer out details of agreement, which was reached on December 17

Main Points of the Protocol

Provides for a “Post-Separation” UMC to continue, while also providing for the creation of a new traditional Methodist denomination

Other denominations (like a more progressive expression) may also emerge if they register with the Council of Bishops by May 15, 2021

The Post-Separation UMC will modify the *Discipline* to fit its context and eliminate current language concerning LGBTQ issues, removing restrictions on marriage and ordination

Traditional denomination will create its own Discipline and structure, which the Wesleyan Covenant Association has already done

Decision-Making on Joining New Methodist Denomination(s)

Central Conferences (Africa, Europe, Philippines) - will require a 2/3 vote to join new Methodist denomination, otherwise they remain with the Post-Separation UMC

Annual Conferences - if no vote, they remain with Post-Separation UMC. To vote to join a new Methodist denomination, must pass that vote by 57%

Local Churches - Church Council determines whether to hold a vote to join a new traditional denomination (if no vote, church remains with annual conference and Post-Separation UMC). Church Council determines whether voting threshold is to be 2/3 or simple majority of professing members present

A Church Conference, presided at by the District Superintendent, must be held within 60 days of the Church Council's decision to hold a vote and determine a threshold.

Property and Assets

Local churches who join the new traditional Methodist denomination will retain their property and assets

Local churches are expected to meet connectional responsibilities up to the date of separation, but there is no mechanism to enforce back payment of apportionments

No additional apportionments or pension liability payments will be required upon separation, other than previously documented loans from the annual conference

Property and Assets

If a church chooses to close, property will be subject to a lien in favor of Wespath for payment of future unfunded pension liabilities

Churches who disaffiliate but do not join one of the new Methodist denominations created by this Protocol will be subject to Paragraph 2553 of the *UM Discipline* (in other words, paying all unfunded pension liabilities + apportionments)

Property belonging to Annual, Jurisdictional, and Central Conferences will be retained by those entities regardless of affiliation

Financial Agreements

A total sum of \$25 million will be paid by the General Council on Finance and Administration to the new traditional Methodist denomination over the ensuing quadrennium

A total sum of \$2 million will be paid to any other potential Methodist denominations emerging out of this Protocol

\$39 million will be set aside over the next two quadrennia to fund ministries for and by Asian, Black, Hispanic-Latino, Native American, and Pacific Islander communities including the National Plans for these communities. This also includes support for Africa University.

Pension Plan

Pension plans remain in place for all current clergy and lay employees regardless of which Methodist denomination they affiliate

Wespath will remain the administrator of the pension funds for all Methodist denominations emerging out of this agreement

Moratoriums

All administrative or judicial processes addressing restrictions in the *Discipline* regarding same-sex weddings and ordination of LGBTQ persons shall be held in abeyance effective January 1, 2020.

Annual Conferences must delay closure of churches until after the 2020 General Conference except in situations where the local church voluntarily requests closure due to financial insolvency

Next Steps

Council of Bishops has requested the Judicial Council to make a declaratory decision on constitutionality of this Protocol

Council of Bishops has requested GCFA to evaluate financial impact of the Protocol

Council of Bishops will work with Commission on General Conference to make this Protocol the first order of business at General Conference 2020

If passed, space will be provided for each new denomination (post-separation UMC and traditional denomination) to meet and begin their separate work

What This Means for TLUMC

If the Protocol passes at the 2020 General Conference, the membership of TLUMC will have the option to stay in the post-separation UMC or vote to join the new traditional Methodist denomination

No matter the decision, there will be change at the denominational level

The Next Steps Task Force

Developing a list of values TLUMC will use in decision-making

Developing various contingency plans to present to Church Council

Sponsoring Town Halls and providing constant communication about General Conference plans and results

What to do in the meantime...

Stay informed. Attend the Town Hall meetings.
Encourage others to attend or watch them online.

Choose accurate news sources: The best source for news on developments is the United Methodist News Service (umns.org). National media doesn't understand us!

Most of all, PRAY!

Next Town Hall Meeting

Monday, February 10 at 6:30pm

Topic: United Methodism 101 - looking at UMC structure and how decisions get made at the denominational level

This will be a helpful guide in understanding the work of the General Conference, the Jurisdictional Conference, and the Annual Conference

You'll also learn how the General Conference will vote on this and other proposals