

Misinformation Abounds

Recently, United Methodist News Service, along with several bishops, has issued articles aimed at correcting what they perceive to be misinformation being shared about what The United Methodist Church will become in the future. Unfortunately, some of what they share about perceived misinformation is itself misinformed.

It is understandable that people get caught up in the emotions of conflict and separation. This is a fraught time within our denomination. The future ministry, and in some cases even existence, of congregations and clergy are being decided during the next 18 months. People have deep feelings about their faith and relationship with Jesus Christ, as well as about their church, which has been a spiritual home for them for decades in many cases. Some laity feel betrayed by a denomination that has changed beyond their recognition and in some ways has “left” them. Other laity feel betrayed by the fact that they have not been made aware of the deep theological conflict in our denomination and are just now finding out that the church is experiencing separation. Other laity feel betrayed by the fact that some congregations, laity, and clergy can no longer in good conscience be part of The United Methodist Church.

Given the emotions and stakes involved, it is understandable that some people get the facts wrong or exaggerate what they perceive about those with whom they disagree. In such a time as this, it is important to focus on the facts and not allow our feelings to carry us into the realm of speculation and character assassination. This temptation can afflict people on all sides of the current divide in our church. Though we disagree and are not afraid to speak clearly about that disagreement, we should still speak and act in love toward all people, including those with whom we disagree.

With that in mind, several points of misinformation need to be corrected.

A Matter of Doctrine

Both the UM News piece and a letter from Bishop Michael McKee (North Texas) allege that some traditionalists are saying the UM Church “is about to alter its doctrine to deny the virgin birth, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, or salvation through Christ alone.” I know of no reputable traditionalist spokesperson who is making this charge. To be clear, it is very difficult (some would say impossible) to change the official doctrinal standards of The United Methodist Church. It requires a two-thirds vote of the General Conference and a three-fourths vote of all annual conference members (see Par. 59 of the *Discipline*).

The issue for traditionalists is not whether the denomination changes its official doctrinal standards. It’s whether those doctrinal standards are worth the paper they are written on. Can doctrinal standards be standards if they are not enforced?

Since at least the late 1990's, there have been bishops, seminary professors, and clergy in the UM Church who have written and taught doctrine contrary to the doctrines contained in our standards. They have done so openly and publicly, yet without any accountability or consequences. To be clear, those teaching such non-Methodist doctrines are a minority in the church. Yet, where doctrinal standards are not enforced, they do not matter.

The flip side of this question is the acknowledgement that in some annual conferences it is impossible for someone who affirms unquestioningly all the Methodist doctrines to be approved for ordination. They are thought to be too "fundamentalist" and not sufficiently "pluralist" or open to new ideas. In this case, the doctrinal standards function almost in reverse. Rather than insisting a candidate for ministry affirm all our doctrines, a board of ministry sometimes penalizes someone who does affirm them.

So the issue is not whether our doctrines change on paper. The issue is whether our doctrines change in practice, and whether clergy are held to our doctrinal standards. Unquestionably, the doctrinal standards in our denomination do not function as such, or they only function in some annual conferences or only inconsistently. This is unlikely to change in a future UM Church.

Split or Splinter – a Rose by Any Other Name

The UM News piece maintains that the UM Church is not splitting. They define "splitting" as "a negotiated agreement within the denomination to divide assets and resources." Under that definition, adoption of the *Protocol* would have foster a split in the denomination.

Instead, they say the UM Church is "splintering." "What is happening is that some traditionalist leaders have decided to create their own denomination (the Global Methodist Church). Leaders of that denomination and other unofficial advocacy groups ... are encouraging like-minded United Methodist congregations and clergy to disaffiliate from The United Methodist Church and join their denomination instead."

This is a distinction without a difference. We prefer to use the term "separation" to describe what is happening in the church. People of different theological perspectives are separating from one another, which involves some congregations and clergy disaffiliating from the denomination.

Whether it is separation, splitting, splintering, or dividing, The United Methodist Church is undergoing profound change through the withdrawal of congregations, lay members, and clergy. Whether we want such an occurrence to take place or not, it is happening. This puts congregations in the position of having to make a decision to either join those who are disaffiliating or to remain part of the UM Church in order to be faithful to their understanding of Methodism.

Room for Traditionalists?

UM News asks, “Is the UMC really asking traditionalists to leave the denomination?” Of course, no traditionalists are alleging that the UM Church wants traditionalists to leave. UM leaders and bishops are trying very hard to persuade traditionalists to stay in the denomination.

The issue is better put in Bishop McKee’s letter that says, “Clergy and laity alike have voiced that they have heard there will not be a place for traditionalists in The United Methodist Church moving forward and that their only option is to depart the denomination.” The Council of Bishops and others have worked hard to articulate that traditionalists will be welcome in the UM Church in the future. Their narrative document states, “We cannot be a traditional church or a progressive church or a centrist church. ... All of our members, clergy, local churches, and annual conferences will continue to have a home in the future United Methodist Church, whether they consider themselves liberal, evangelical, progressive, traditionalist, middle of the road, conservative, centrist, or something else.”

For traditionalists to remain in the UM Church is a legitimate choice, one that at least some traditionalists will make.

The real question is whether a traditional theological voice and presence will be respected and welcome in a future UM Church. The fact is that no one can say for sure. What we do know is that the traditional voice is currently not respected or welcome in some parts of the church.

A pastor of youth ministry at a large, traditionalist UM congregation recently attended a meeting of youth ministry leaders from many large UM congregations across the country. In visioning for the future of youth ministry in the UM Church, these leaders overwhelmingly agreed that they could no longer use masculine pronouns for God and they could not address God as Father. They resolved not to speak of the Kingdom of God, using instead the term kin-dom of God. And they would use preferred pronouns for people in accommodating the trend towards transgenderism and non-binary gender identity.

The traditionalist youth ministry leader felt like a fish out of water at this meeting. The traditional voice would play little to no role in shaping the future of youth ministry in the UM Church, according to this gathering of leaders. The Kingdom of God is the essence of Jesus’ message and the first thing he proclaimed when his ministry began: “The time has come; the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15; cf. Matthew 4:17, Luke 4:43). Turning God’s reign to be established on earth into a relationship among people (kin) is to exchange the vertical dimension of the faith for the horizontal. Removing the Fatherhood of God is not only unscriptural, it also contravenes our doctrinal standards, where God is named as Father, and jeopardizes our understanding of the Trinity. These are serious doctrinal matters.

I have heard from students in the Course of Study for licensed local pastors that some of their professors grade their papers down for using masculine or Father language for God. Some annual conference boards of ministry require candidates to use gender-neutral terminology for

God, or their ability to be ordained is put at risk. Interestingly, God is referred to as Father 32 times in our *Book of Discipline*, and baptism, confirmation, and ordination are required to take place in the name of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” The official stance of the church allows the use of masculine language for God, yet parts of the church in the U.S. have taken it upon themselves to make the use of masculine language unacceptable, even for traditionalists.

One wonders where the traditionalist pastors of the future will come from in the UM Church. Congregations that are traditionalist and want a traditionalist pastor may find there is a shortage of traditionalist UM pastors. Many annual conference boards of ministry are routinely delaying or excluding traditionalist candidates for ministry. Many district committees on ministry discourage traditionalist candidates from pursuing a calling to ministry in the UM Church. Without an ongoing supply of traditionalist clergy, traditionalist congregations will need to accept clergy who may not promote the same theological perspective as the congregation. And it will certainly diminish the traditionalist voice.

While we cannot know for sure that traditionalist voices will not be welcome in the future UM Church, and we accept at face value the sincerity of those who promote that they will be welcome, past and current experience does not provide a hopeful indication that will be the case.

Inaccurate information and caricatures abound in the sharing of material related to congregational discernment of their future alignment. We should make our best effort to share accurate facts and, when speculating, make clear the basis of that speculation. We will not be perfect in that regard, but we make our commitment to make every effort to do so. Correcting misinformation is a job for all of those who are leaders in the UM Church and those in the process of disaffiliation. An accurate understanding of reality gives a solid basis for decision-making that will lead to no regrets later and avoid any feeling of having been betrayed or misled. The best decision is one that considers all the relevant facts and information while prayerfully considering one’s understanding of the faith, seeking the best alignment with a denomination that reinforces one’s values and beliefs. That kind of decision is a win for everyone involved.

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