

Sinking Sand: Why I'm Leaving United Methodism

I was about 5 years old, sitting next to my mother in church when we came to the place in the service where we say the Lord's Prayer. My mother looked down at me, a little taken aback, when I joined in the liturgy. I heard those familiar words recited so many times that they were ingrained in me already, even at such a young age. It was still the beginning of my bringing up among "the people called Methodists." My memories of our little United Methodist church are many and golden. At Christmas, we hung the greens, placed "Chrismons" on the big tree, and lit the advent candles. I waved the branches on Palm Sunday, and sang "He Lives" on Easter.

I went to Sunday school. I attended VBS. I had the lead role in the Christmas musical when I was 8. In 5th grade, I attended "Sonshine" camp. In 6th grade, I was confirmed and baptized. In 7th grade, I joined the youth group and went on mission trips.

I wasn't just told what to believe, but why we believed, and how to apply tradition, reason, and experience to the study of God's Holy Word. As an analytical child with a need to understand the "how" and "why," this intellectual approach to scriptural study and interpretation was important. In Methodism, science and faith were reconciled – not separate – celebrating and even validating each other.

The church nurtured my gift for music, which eventually became my vocation. I sang in the choir, I played handbells, my piano teacher was a member of our church and our recitals were held there. I first learned to read music from the hymnal. I was in 8th grade, when I sang my first Christmas Eve solo to a packed sanctuary – something I would do for the next 10 years.

As I grew up, The United Methodist Church continued to play a central role in my life. I worked in church music programs, directing choirs and handbells to groups of all ages, from 3 to 93. I met and married my husband in a United Methodist campus ministry. I have been a United Methodist clergy spouse for 16 years. Our children have been welcomed into the nurseries, Sunday schools, VBSes, and church pews of over a dozen United Methodist congregation.

I say this to make the point: You'd be hard-pressed to find somebody more Methodist than I am. Of all the cradle Methodists in the world, I'm among the most Methodist. Just ask my Baptist friends! But my lifelong history, my golden memories, my deep personal connections, my admiration for the Wesleyan quadrilateral, my commitment to thorough Scripture study, my fierce, long-rooted loyalty to the United Methodist denomination – all these could not withstand a truth that first crept and then crashed into my heart in recent years: the United Methodist denomination that raised me is gone. What remains of it has abandoned me and much of my traditional theology.

The decision for me and other orthodox United Methodists is not just about staying or going – it's about accepting that we have already been cast aside by this institution and determining what we're willing to compromise moving forward. Will it be our membership in this institution, or our traditional beliefs rooted in Scripture?

Four years ago, I not only denied this truth, I fought it. Vehemently. I considered myself a centrist, deeply loyal to the institution of The United Methodist Church. I saw the division. I heard the arguments. But I could not imagine my faith outside of the institution I championed for so long. In hindsight, I might have even made the denomination itself an idol in my life. My devotion was entirely misdirected.

The turning point for me happened with the special session of the General Conference in 2019. What I witnessed during the streaming of the proceedings as well as on social media from self-proclaimed progressive and centrist Methodists, was nothing short of alarming. It made me question what was really happening, and what was actually at stake for “the people called Methodist.” A strong conviction took root in my heart. This was about so much more than the presenting issue of human sexuality. Ultimately, this was a battle to determine at what altar we will serve: that of the institution, or The Kingdom of God.

There has been no shortage of complete disregard and open contempt for clearly stated teachings in our Book of Discipline. No doubt, you’ve heard accounts of this. But the ruling minority, those who serve in high positions of leadership within our denomination, do not align with the congregational majority. This is why open defiance to our social and theological doctrine has been allowed to persist, while threat and punishment take place against traditional Methodists who raise concerns. Denominational leadership is cherry-picking which parts of our doctrine and discipline it will uphold and enforce, giving preference to that which preserves the institution, not historic Christian beliefs. “Rules for thee and not for me.” And woe to those who stand in the way. I could expound on this by sharing several disturbing stories of open hostility toward my family by progressive leaders in the United Methodist institution. I’ll just say that as a traditional clergy household, I’ve been holding my breath for the better part of three years.

But there is Good News: In the midst of great denominational turmoil, Jesus is still Lord. That has not changed, nor will it. And for my fellow cradle Methodists, and for United Methodists everywhere who find themselves struggling with the idea of what comes next, I have this good news: meaningful and relevant ministry exists outside of the institution of The United Methodist Church.

My prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness won’t mean less outside of this denomination. We are members first and foremost of Christ’s Holy Church. The ministry that happens therein MUST be for the glory and in the name of Jesus Christ. Not in the name of Methodism, not in the name of John Wesley, not in the name of intellectualism, or politics, or even social justice. It must begin and end with fierce loyalty to the one and only Truth, the one and only Light, the one and only Life. This is the way.

Our mission is the same today as it was yesterday and will be tomorrow, and our ability to carry out that mission is not determined by membership in anything but the body of Christ. I don’t know what the future holds for me outside of The United Methodist Church. I may commit to another form of Methodist expression, perhaps through the Global Methodist Church or some other Wesleyan denomination. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. And even if we aren’t a people called United Methodist anymore, it is more important to me that we be a people called “faithful.”

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