

More on Misinformation

It is important to have accurate information about all the issues surrounding disaffiliation in order to make good decisions. Last week, we explored the information shared by UM Communications in a post called “Is the United Methodist Church really ...? (Part I).” We covered the status of our doctrinal standards in United Methodism today, the reality of separation, and whether it is likely that traditionalists will have a respected voice in a post-separation UM Church.

Today’s post deals with issues particularly related to the church’s stance on marriage and human sexuality. You can find this information in Part II of the UM Communications blog series.

Changes to the UM Church’s Stance

The UM Communications piece rightly notes that the advent of separation does not immediately change the policies of The United Methodist Church, which are set by the General Conference. However, as we noted last week with regard to doctrine, the fact that the UM Church has policies on paper does not necessarily mean that those policies are being followed.

Based on their resistance to the actions of the 2019 General Conference reaffirming the church’s traditional teachings, and in keeping with the proposed *Protocol* moratorium on complaints and charges, some bishops and annual conferences have disregarded the denomination’s stance that marriage is only between one man and one woman. They have allowed (and in some cases explicitly permitted) clergy to perform same-sex weddings and have commissioned or ordained non-celibate gays and lesbians as clergy.

The UM Communications piece maintains that the majority of U.S. annual conferences are not “ignoring or refusing to implement the *Discipline’s* statements, restrictions, and requirements regarding practicing homosexuals and same-sex weddings.” Following the 2019 General Conference, 26 annual conferences in the U.S. (more than half) passed resolutions repudiating the General Conference actions. Some explicitly stated they would not follow the *Discipline*, while at least a half-dozen conferences ordained openly gay clergy. The Iowa Conference began explicitly permitting same-sex weddings in January of this year. The Western Jurisdiction bishops publicly stated that they will not “withhold or challenge ordination based on a candidate’s gender identity or sexual orientation,” nor will they “punish clergy who celebrate the marriage of two adults of any gender or sexual orientation.” A number of annual conference boards of ministry have said they will no longer consider a candidate’s sexual orientation or inquire about their relationship status.

The UM Communications piece rightly points out that the *Discipline* does not prohibit ordination based on “sexual orientation or gender identity.” But the piece fails to reckon with the fact that this language has been used over the years as code for disregarding not only the orientation of a person, but also their practices. Boards of ministry have demonstrated that

when they talk about ignoring sexual orientation, they also mean they will ignore whether the candidate is or is not in a same-sex marriage or relationship.

UM Communications points out that bishops do not punish in the complaint process, so they are not ignoring the *Discipline*. Again, the piece fails to reckon with the fact that bishops control the complaint process, deciding whether to process a complaint or dismiss it.

Whether or not a majority of conferences are now ignoring the *Discipline*, a significant number are. This has resulted in a *de facto* change in the denomination's standards in those conferences.

Will the UM Church “drop all prohibitions related to human sexuality at its next General Conference in 2024?” The UM Communications piece states, “all of these kinds of proposals have come before General Conferences in the past. And all have been defeated, every time. At present, there do not appear to be enough shifts in the makeup of the delegations to the General Conference in 2024 to conclude that any of these proposals will pass.”

As many have noted, the margin for passing the Traditional Plan in 2019 was fairly narrow. The shift of only 28 delegates would have changed the outcome. The election of delegates in 2019 for the 2020 General Conference saw a definite shift, with an increase in progressive delegates elected in the U.S. Whether or not it would have resulted in the 2020 General Conference changing the church's stance, it would have been a very close vote.

Looking ahead to 2024, it seems likely there will be new elections of delegates. And this time, many traditionalist members of annual conference – both clergy and lay – will be missing because they have disaffiliated. This could result in the election of a much more progressive delegation in the U.S. Maintaining the current stance of the church is not as assured an outcome as UM Communications seems to think.

Drag Queen Clergy?

UM Communications states that the UM Church is not ordaining drag queens. This comes from a situation in the Vermillion River District of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference, where the district committee on ministry voted unanimously to certify a candidate for ordained ministry who identifies as a non-practicing homosexual but preaches under the drag name Ms. Penny Cost for the purpose of evangelizing people of many sexual and gender identities.

UM Communications accurately notes there is no prohibition in the *Discipline* against a person performing in drag from being considered for ordained ministry. One might question the wisdom of having a candidate for ministry who does so, independently of whether or not it is prohibited in the *Discipline*.

The piece asserts that certification as a candidate is the beginning step of what normally is a five to eight-year process toward ordination. It states that, until a person is commissioned by a ¾ vote of the clergy session of an annual conference, they cannot preside at sacraments or at

weddings. However, a district committee can license a candidate as a local pastor, which does not require the approval of the clergy session. Licensed local pastors can preside at sacraments and weddings in the church they serve.

Given the previous unanimous support of the district committee, it seems likely that this candidate who preaches in drag could be appointed to serve a church as a licensed local pastor, while continuing the process toward ordination.

Worship of a “Queer God?”

The UM Communications piece brings up an incident at Duke Divinity School, one of the official United Methodist seminaries. A student group at the seminary led a Pride worship service in the chapel affirming LGBTQ+ identities and practices and identifying God as “queer” or “strange one, fabulous one, fluid, and ever-becoming one.” According to the article, one participant stated that God is “drag queen, and transman, and gender-fluid.”

The piece notes that a student-led service in the chapel does not necessarily reflect the official position of the seminary or of the UM Church. It identifies one of the students named in the article as a candidate for United Methodist ministry. However, two other students in the article also interned at Duke Memorial UM Church.

The issue here is not that one worship service represents the official teaching of a particular seminary. Rather, this is one example of how many official United Methodist seminaries have a climate of advocacy for affirming LGBTQ+ identities and practices that often morphs into a re-imagining or distortion of our understanding of God in line with gay categories. “Queer theology” is an academic discipline found at some of our seminaries that seeks to reinterpret Christian faith in light of the experiences of gay and gender non-binary people. “Pride” worship services have become commonplace at the various seminaries.

Students preparing for ministry in the UM Church are often enculturated into the affirmation of LGBTQ+ identities. Many of them support having non-celibate gays and lesbians in ordained ministry and the ability to perform same-sex weddings. These students become pastors who go into their churches as advocates for LGBTQ+ affirmation. The unanimous support of the Vermillion River District committee for a gay man preaching in drag is evidence for this viewpoint. After 20-30 years of this kind of education in many of our seminaries, the result is a clergy that is much more progressive than the laity of our church. These clergy have led their congregations into a more affirming stance, leading to annual conferences that have become more affirming, and eventually to the anticipated change in our denominational policies regarding the definition of marriage and the qualifications for ordination.

Traditionalist United Methodists see this trajectory as an indication that the church is on the wrong track. We do not support this direction of the church, and it is one of the reasons we believe separation is a necessary option for congregations and clergy. If the bus is headed toward a destination where you do not want to go, it may be time to get off the bus.

Our desire is not to mischaracterize The United Methodist Church or mislead anyone seeking to understand the likely futures represented by the options available. If one wants to belong to a denomination that affirms the 3,000-year-old understanding of marriage as between man and woman, the Global Methodist Church would be a likely option. If one wants to belong to a church that is increasingly affirming of LGBTQ+ identities and relationships, The United Methodist Church would be a likely option.

The underlying message of the official communications from the denomination seems to be: “nothing is going to change; traditionalists are welcome in the UM Church; there is no need to push a decision now; wait until after General Conference 2024.” Unfortunately, as I explained last week, the deadline for disaffiliation right now is December 31, 2023. It is uncertain what the 2024 General Conference will do when it comes to pathways for congregations or conferences to disaffiliate. We hope they will enact a fair and equitable pathway, but there is no guarantee. And for many traditionalists, waiting two more years will only further weaken their congregation and delay their ability to focus single-mindedly on the mission of their church.

There is no need to demean or distort what others stand for. Rather, it should be in the interest of all to accurately portray the directions taken by various denominational alternatives. These two blog posts have hopefully clarified where traditionalists stand vis-à-vis the direction that United Methodism is taking. Individuals and congregations can weigh their options in light of the available information and choose their future as the Lord leads.

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