

A WAY FORWARD IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

In an effort to find a path out of our dilemma on human sexuality, on a motion from West Ohio delegate George Howard on 18May16 the General Conference of 2016 authorized the Council of Bishops to form a Commission on a Way Forward by a vote of 428 in favor of the proposal and 405 against it. That is about as narrow a margin of approval as a measure ever receives from a General Conference. If twelve delegates who supported the proposal had voted the other way, the proposal would have failed.

This is an indication of how evenly the Church is currently divided over this issue.

Mind you, the Council of Bishops had all the authority it needed on its own to form a commission to study this issue, and why it chose to ask the General Conference to authorize this work shall probably remain a mystery. My guess is that the Council is likely as divided as the rest of the Church, but we don't have certain knowledge about this, since when the Council has conversations about this, it does so behind closed doors.

On 05Oct16 the Council announced that it had decided that the Commission would be formed of 8 bishops, 13 clerics who are not bishops, and 8 laics. So that you don't have to do the math, that means the bishops proposed a membership that was to be 28% lay and 72% clergy, when more than 99% of the membership of the Church is lay. There was an immediate and overwhelmingly negative reaction from the laity of the Church about this, so the Council said it would reconsider that decision.

On 24Oct16 the Council announced that it, in fact, had changed the plan, and announced that there would be 3 bishops who would serve as non-voting moderators, 8 bishops as voting members, 11 elders, 2 deacons, and 11 laics, for a total membership of 35, though the membership is most often stated as 32, discounting the participation of the 3 moderators. I don't think that is much of a discount, since there can be little doubt that the 3 moderators were full participants in the processes of the Commission, which likely has never taken a vote on anything. By any reasonable reckoning, lay participation thus ended up being 31.4% of the total, instead of the originally proposed 28%.

Sometime in December 2016 moderator Bishop Ken Carter announced that the Commission would hold all its meetings behind closed doors. He said this was being done "to enable the group to build relationships and operate in an atmosphere of trust."

On 24Apr17 the Council announced that it has called a special session of the General Conference to be held in St. Louis MO 23-26Feb19. Because of disciplinary requirements about translating, printing, and distributing materials, that meant that the final report of the work has to be submitted to the delegates on or before 08Jul18. Then on 09Jul17 the Commission on the General Conference, the body of the Church that plans these events, announced that the first day of the special session would be devoted to prayer and waiting for all the delegates to arrive, meaning that the four day conference, for purposes of engaging in deliberations about the report of the Commission, has now become a three day conference.

CURRENT STATUS

From that time until the last few weeks all the information released to the Church by the Commission has related to its process. There had not been any substantive statements about the Commission's work until on 09Nov17, at the close of its semiannual meeting, the Council of Bishops announced that, based on the interim report it received from the Commission, it was considering three possibilities for what it would propose to General Conference 2019 on a way forward. The Council described those three choices as follows:

- 1) One sketch of a model affirms the current Book of Discipline language and places a high value on accountability.
- 2) Another sketch of a model removes restrictive language and places a high value on contextualization. This sketch also specifically protects the rights of those whose conscience will not allow them to perform same gender weddings or ordain LGBTQ persons.
- 3) A third sketch of a model is grounded in a unified core that includes shared doctrine and services and one COB, while also creating different branches that have clearly defined values such as accountability, contextualization and justice.

In further description, the Council said, "each sketch includes gracious way of exit for those who feel called to exit from the denomination."

As important as what it said here was what the Council did NOT say. These three options are three of the four possible options for a way forward which have always been the only four choices the Commission has ever had, and the fourth option is Full Inclusion, meaning the full inclusion in the life and ministries of the whole Church of LGBTQ people.

The Council has not told us why it did not include this fourth option, nor did it give us much insight into its thinking about the three options it considers to be on the table for consideration. So, let's unpack that just a bit.

COB Option 1 may legitimately be said to be Status Quo, since it envisions leaving all the exclusionary language in the Book of Discipline. However, it goes beyond status quo when it says "places a high value on accountability." The issue here is that since enforcement of the accountability provisions is currently regional, enforcement is somewhere between ineffective and nonexistent in much of the Church. It is the status quo that got us to the dilemma in law and covenant that prevails right now. Therefore to make this work, enforcement will have to be centralized and strengthened, and that would almost certainly lead to an exit from the Church of those committed to full inclusion who are simply waiting to see what comes out of the study process.

COB Option 2 is best characterized as code for local option, which was introduced to General Conference in 2016 by the Connectional Table as A Third Way. In this model bishops would be permitted to decide whom to appoint to what ministry settings, annual conferences would be permitted to decide who is eligible for ordination, pastors would be permitted to decide whom to marry to whom, being gay would be decriminalized, and officiating at same sex union ceremonies would likewise be decriminalized. There is, however, a really big difference in the status of the Church now from what obtained in 2016 when A Third Way was considered at General Conference 2016. Karen Oliveto, a woman married to her same sex partner, was elected and consecrated to be a bishop of the whole Church. If this model has any chance to be adopted at General Conference 2019 as the way forward, then the episcopacy of The UMC will have to be regionalized to provide that a bishop's authority does not extend beyond the region in which the bishop was elected. And even with that change, if this model is adopted, then the Church will be at risk to lose those members who are firmly committed to the preservation throughout the whole Church of the status quo.

COB Option 3 can be called Separation, and it is, without doubt, the way forward that will most traumatically affect the current structure and organization of the Church. It will mean the formation of organically separate church bodies that would likely be able to relate to one another under some yet-to-be-formed Wesleyan Alliance of churches with some shared services. But, make no mistake about it, the current connectional structure of the Church, meaning our general agencies, schools, colleges and universities, seminaries, hospitals, campus ministries, and mission stations would all be at risk for reduction or discontinuance. Most at risk of all would be the Council of Bishops, itself. There is, in my judgment, no possibility that churches separated over the issue of human sexuality will be able to agree mutually to support one Council of Bishops. Each church would be required to fund its own episcopacy, and its bishops would have to gather as a separate Council. There might be some sort of gathering of bishops of the Wesleyan Alliance, but it would almost certainly be a collegial gathering with no authority for deciding anything for the member churches.

With that introduction, I look forward to hearing from each of our other panel members, each of whom has an important perspective to share.

Respectively submitted,

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