

Soapstone UMC

The United Methodist Church and the State of the UM Connection¹

Where we Have Been

In 1972 the first statement about homosexuality was included in the Discipline. It affirmed the sacred worth of all persons and also put restrictions on who could be ordained. Since 1972 this issue has been debated at every General Conference. The way things get added or changed in the Book of Discipline is a lot like the way things get added to the law code in our country – democratically and politically, and the process is often messy. Because General Conference is a legislative body, it is often impossible to predict what will or will not be changed at GC because changes can be made up until the moment something passes, doesn't pass, or is amended on the floor and passed.

In 2016 the General Conference called for a special General Conference to deal with our statements about human sexuality as it pertains to LGBTQ persons. The 2019 Special Session of the General Conference was the last time this body met, which was where the "Traditional Plan" was passed and the current statements about homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and the ordination of LGBTQ persons did not fundamentally change. In addition, the 2019 Special Session approved an "exit plan" or "disaffiliation plan" which is now paragraph #2553 in our Book of Discipline.

The special conference did not ultimately result in changed language at that time but revealed that a process of separation was likely necessary. A group of UMC leaders worked with a mediator and created what they called A Protocol for Grace through Separation. It would have given \$30 million to Wesley Covenant Association to help fund a new Methodist expression and would have created a process where those churches desiring to become part of that would have a process of moving their affiliation and property. It was to have been voted on in 2020. The 2020 General Conference did not happen because of the pandemic. GC was postponed to 2022.

In March of this year, the Commission on the General Conference officially postponed General Conference again until 2024. This means, among other things, that petitions and legislation related to "The Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation" and other related items have been delayed until then. GC is not happening in 2022, primarily because those who would travel to the US for GC faced many barriers and delays to travel, passport and visa backlogs, and other things related to the pandemic.

When it was announced that the GC was being postponed until 2024, the Wesley Covenant Association announced it would be launching a new Methodist denomination, called the Global Methodist Church. That denomination officially launched on May 1, 2022. The GMC currently

¹ The sections "Where We Have Been," "Where We Are," and "The Continuing United Methodist Church" were written by Rev. Kevin Baker, and ordained Elder in the NCCUMC, published here with some minor edits to congregation specific information.

has a website and a transitional Book of Doctrines and Discipline, but the denomination will be in transition for the next 12-24 months or more, until they can convene their first General Conference to ratify their shared organizational documents and doctrinal statements.

Where We Are

In Acts 16:6-15, the believers and missionaries of the early church had to bathe every decision, every action, and every course adjustment on their missionary journeys in a spirit of prayer, seeking to faithfully heed promptings and warnings from the Holy Spirit along the way.

Today calls for that same spirit of prayer and hopefulness about the future of SUMC and of our larger United Methodist Connection. It is no secret that the United Methodist Church is deeply divided. As one pastor put it, we are *“divided over issues of governance, autonomy, scriptural interpretation, and inclusion. How shall we relate to one another? How much autonomy should the local church have? How do we read and interpret the Holy Scriptures? Who is welcome and how far does that welcome extend? These are all big questions with no easy answers.”*

It has become clear that some clergy and churches in our annual conference and in the larger UM Connection desire to exit the denomination now rather than wait for 2024. To address this situation, Bishop Lenard Fairley has communicated the NC Annual Conference requirements for clergy and churches who desire to exit the denomination under Book of Discipline paragraph 2553.

The Continuing United Methodist Church

At this moment in our common life together, the majority of United Methodist Clergy and United Methodist Congregations are not leaving the denomination. The question may need to be asked: Why continue in the United Methodist Church? There are too many reasons to name here, but please talk with others - clergy and laity – who are remaining United Methodists. Ask them what excites them about the future. The United Methodist Church will remain a big tent. We may not all think alike, but we believe we can all love alike. We are a church that would prefer to be defined by what we are for rather than what we are against.

The Council of Bishops also made an official statement in November last year about remaining United Methodist:

“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. We hold on to our Wesleyan heritage that “the living core of the Christian faith is revealed in Scripture, illuminated by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason”.

Personal Note from Pastor Mitzi

I recall stepping into my first Methodist Studies class in seminary and feeling a warmth envelop my heart and soul. I heard again and again, "God's mercy is over all his works." (Psalm 145:9). "This," I thought, "*this* is everything that I believe and have believed my whole life. *This* message of God's wide, gracious, loving embrace is what I first heard as a little girl in my grandparents' UM church and why at the age of 16, as soon as I could drive myself, I drove to a UMC, joined it, and began attending on my own."

I love the hospitable, missional, grace-filled nature of the UMC. The UMC has shown me what it means to be the hands and feet of Christ through roofing houses, framing front porches, chopping wood, and making sandwiches. The UMC has taught me a dynamic view of scripture as "a living word" through Disciple Bible Study, Companions in Christ, and a lifetime of challenging preaching. When the UMC is at its best, I have witnessed people who could disagree politically and theologically, read the Bible differently, and still say with John Wesley, "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?"

I affirm the UMC's Articles of Religion, our Confession of Faith, and our Wesleyan theology. I take my vows to ordained ministry in the UMC seriously and have no intention of leaving the denomination.

I love Soapstone UMC, this church born out of a camp meeting, with 185-years of Methodist heritage. I love this church that has nurtured and produced seminary students, preachers and bishops, delegates to jurisdictional conference, and NC Annual Conference level leaders in youth ministry, pastoral development, and creation care, just to name a few.

I recognize that not everyone is of one mind regarding human sexuality, but I do not get the sense that we are anywhere near the 2/3 of members that would need to vote to disaffiliate. The vast majority of longtime members, new members, and prospective members who have approached me to discuss the issues at the heart of the current debate have voiced a desire for Soapstone UMC to remain open, hospitable, and loving to all people. I believe our congregation wants to keep focused on longtime missional priorities such as reaching out to children and people on the margins, caring deeply for our church family, and growing in Christlikeness through worship and study.

I believe Soapstone UMC can weather this time of denominational upheaval with resilience and faithfulness to our membership vows "to be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church, and to do all in our power to strengthen its ministries." Staying United Methodist does not require any action. General Conference meets again in 2024 and any issues that may be passed then can be addressed locally, as has been done in previous years.

Please continue to pray for the Church in this season. May our conversations continue to reflect Christian love and grace.

Pastor Mitzi