

UMAction

Briefing



‘United’ Methodism Fractures—and Time Is Running Out!

Most faithful United Methodists in America have far less than one year to act if they want to leave an increasingly liberalizing, dysfunctional UMC and keep their property. As the United Methodist Church (UMC) crumbles, now is the time for churches to leave!

The 13-million-member global United Methodist Church, America’s third-largest religious body, has begun its schism over fundamental theological differences over the authority of Scripture and the nature of God (with sexual morality only being the most prominently cited controversy), amid litigation and recriminations. Hundreds of congregations have already voted to leave the denomination. There will likely be thousands more congregations eventually coming out of the wreckage of the UMC.

In August, two of United Methodism’s largest churches voted to exit. The Woodlands Church outside Houston is U.S. United Methodism’s second largest church in attendance and voted by 96 percent to exit. Faithbridge Church, also near Houston, is U.S. United Methodism’s seventh largest church in attendance and voted by 100 percent to depart.

Paragraph 2553 in the *Book of Discipline* was adopted by the 2019 General Conference and allows U.S. congregations to exit United Methodism by a two-thirds congregational vote and payment of two years of apportionments plus pension liabilities. Exiting churches must be ratified by their annual conference.

The technical deadline is December 31, 2023, but the required final approval of disaffiliations can only happen when annual conferences meet, which for U.S. conferences is in May or June. But the real deadline for churches to act is much earlier than that. Annual conferences have set deadlines for churches to hold their congregational votes several months earlier. And these congregational votes can only happen when the district superintendent (DS) schedules them to meet—with there being lag times of at least several weeks between when the congregation requests to have such a vote and when the DS actually schedules the meeting. And before requesting such a meeting, a congregation should go through a discernment process of at least a few weeks—and some conferences are requiring this to take multiple months. So there is not much time left for our congregations to act!

As denominational politics shift, it is now more possible that the 2024 General Conference will liberalize the denomination’s standards on marriage and other issues, but there is no guarantee that it will adopt any

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The Rev. Jeff Olive, a Texas Conference district superintendent, presides at an Aug. 7 meeting at The Woodlands Methodist Church called to consider disaffiliation. Located north of Houston in the Woodlands community, members voted by a 96.3% margin to leave The United Methodist Church. (Photo: The Woodlands Methodist)



The Communion of Saints from the Padua Baptistry (photo: José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons)

Commentary: United Methodist Officials Back Abortion Rights

By Mark Tooley

Some think United Methodism's split is about LGBTQIA+. But official United Methodism's angry reaction to the Supreme Court's overturning *Roe v. Wade* evinces it is much, much more.

The United Methodist Church's official Council of Bishops, General Board of Church and Society, General Board of Global Ministries, and national United Methodist women's group, as well as the UMC's General Commission on the Status and Role of Women, all recently denounced the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling that there is no constitutional right to abortion.

Their statements ignored that the 2016 United Methodist General Conference revoked United Methodism's official support for *Roe v. Wade* dating to 1976 and that United Methodism has been moving in a more pro-life direction since first backing abortion rights in 1970. They also failed to note that the court's decision did not address the ethics of abortion but only found that the Constitution, which does not mention abortion, doesn't prevent states from restricting abortion.

Far more importantly, these United Methodist statements were theologically and ethically vacuous, ignoring two thousand years of rich ecumenical Christian teaching about the sacredness of all human life. They spoke instead in contemporary secular political language of equal access, autonomy, and therapeutic contextualization. The value and purpose of human life from a Christian understanding was unaddressed. Christianity, which is always biased in favor of the defenseless and the voiceless, for 2000 years has cherished the unborn and argued for their protection. The divine Savior of the world entered into his earthly existence as a human embryo and then a fetus. John the Baptist, in the womb of Mary's cousin Elizabeth, leapt for joy when the Virgin announced she had conceived. The unborn are important actors in God's view of human affairs.

Christianity has never, when faithful to its teachings, esteemed persons, born or unborn, based on their world-

ly standing, their intelligence, their capacity to care for themselves, or their ability to speak. Instead, all persons are assumed to image God and receive his love. We respect all persons, no matter their state of development, because they are of God. The recent United Methodist statements in response to the Supreme Court decision did not acknowledge any of this received wisdom of love and care from the church universal.

The chief difference between the contending factions in United Methodism is that Postmodernists who govern U.S. United Methodism are tacitly divorcing from the church universal. They believe that the 95 percent of the contemporary global church, with 99 percent of the historic church, that affirms traditional teachings about marriage, human life and God's gift of male and female, among other treasures of the church's received teaching dating to Christ, and foreshadowed by the Hebrew patriarchs and prophets, is simply wrong. Not just wrong, but oppressive and retrograde. Western progressive Protestantism, in sync with Western secularism, believes itself to be uniquely the vanguard of truth, not just in application of the faith but on core doctrine and ethical teaching.

This postmodern view of the church does not conceive a timeless and boundaryless Body of Christ but rather a discordant collection of willful and self-actualized individuals, each of whom decides what is best. It's not a very appealing vision. But this different version of the church is what is splitting United Methodism, not sexuality per se.

It's unfortunate that United Methodism's split is precipitated by LGBTQIA+ instead of the wider underlying gulf in defining the church and its cosmic identity. Some traditionalists declare the split is about scriptural authority. Postmodernist Methodists insist they heed the Scriptures but through a contemporary, liberationist lens. This interpretation stresses justice and empowerment. Rightly or wrongly, this interpretation separates Western

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progressive Protestants from the rest of Christianity. Post-split, progressive United Methodism, like other U.S.-based declining liberal Mainline Protestant denominations, will reject the church universal's historic and global ecumenical consensus on the SACREDNESS of all human life and God's core purposes for the human person. Traditional Methodists will join global Protestants, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and other Christians, today and in past centuries, who heed the life-affirming traditions of our common faith.

Traditional Methodism affirms that unborn persons merit protection and love, along with all vulnerable image bearers of God. And traditional Methodism will need to craft a new Wesleyan social witness that affirms ecumenical Christian ethics and abundant life with dignity for all people. Most importantly, traditional Methodism will see itself as part of the church universal, which is the Bride of Christ and, by his grace, and in his eyes, without blemish.

Official United Methodism's unserious reaction to the overthrow of *Roe v. Wade* will help Methodists find clarity for the days of choosing ahead. ✚

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new "gracious exit" for traditionalist congregations to leave. So conservative congregations that wait until 2024 may either lose their property or become permanently trapped.

The situation is unfair and tragic. Traditionalists are the global majority in United Methodism. But liberals firmly control the denominational bureaucracy (especially the Council of Bishops), are increasingly unwilling to uphold church law, and are heavy-handedly bullying traditional Bible-believing pastors and congregations in the UMC.

United Methodism as of 2020 had 6.3 million members in the U.S. and seven million in Africa, with additional thousands in Europe and the Philippines. In the previous two reporting years, the U.S. church lost 200,000 members annually while the churches in Africa gained 400,000 annually.

Nearly all other historically liberal Mainline Protestant denominations in the U.S. have liberalized on sexuality over the last two decades. But United Methodism, the largest among them, in 2019 reaffirmed its policies against same-sex marriage and clergy being sexually active outside male/female marriage. The traditionalist win was possible thanks to votes from conservative African delegates.

In the U.S. church, bishops, clergy, and the bureaucracy are overwhelmingly liberal. In early 2020 conservative and liberal church leaders announced a compromise "Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation" to divide the church, allowing each conference and congregation to vote its preference between the post-separation United Methodist Church (psUMC), which would keep most of the bureaucracy but liberalize its moral and effective doctrinal standards, and the Global Methodist Church, the denomination for United Methodists who want to keep the UMC's historic doctrinal and moral standards. Then for their own self-serving reasons, U.S. liberals blocked that convention from meeting before 2024, leaving many traditionalists feeling betrayed and exasperated.

As reported previously, the new Global Methodist Church went ahead and launched in May, in response to the liberal leaders abandoning their previous support of the "Protocol,"

bad-faith filibusters of any opportunity for General Conference to approve a comprehensive separation, and many conservative United Methodists unable or unwilling to wait any longer. The GMC already has congregations in America, the Philippines, and Europe, including the entire former Bulgaria-Romania Conference of the UMC.

United Methodist local church properties are held "in trust" for the denomination through the state-level "annual conference." A growing number of U.S. congregations have been leaving the UMC. Many more of American United Methodism's 30,000 congregations are expected to leave as U.S. annual conferences are holding special sessions this fall to approve disaffiliations, and again as congregations scramble to meet the final 2023 deadline.

Complicating the process, more firmly liberal conferences are adding extra payment requirements to exit. Some conferences with more sympathetic conservative leadership have reduced payments by applying millions of dollars of their reserves towards the exit payments. Even the bare terms of Paragraph 2553 are unfairly difficult. But fact of the matter is that the terms offered by the majority of U.S. annual conferences are affordable, albeit burdensome, for a great many conservative congregations, and if they wait until Paragraph 2553 expires next year, they are *not* likely get a better deal than this paragraph's terms. (A separate *Discipline* provision allowed church property transfers "to another evangelical denomination." But in August, the UMC's Judicial Council, at the behest of liberal bishops, effectively invalidated this as an alternative exit path.)

Meanwhile, United Methodist leaders in Africa, where the majority of church members live, remain committed to the church's official conservative sexuality teachings. Many of them are waiting for the 2024 governing General Conference, which they hope will ratify some version of the "Protocol" for separating the denomination into liberal and conservative branches. They overwhelmingly will not stay in a denomination that liberalizes on sex. Most of Africa will likely join the Global Methodist Church but some might be tempted by autonomy. ✚

Global Methodism's First Bishop Outlines Vision

The new Global Methodist Church (GMC) for traditional Methodists launched May 1, 2022. Recently retired Bishop Emeritus **Mike Lowry** of the GMC's Transitional Leadership Council (TLC) outlined a vision of the Global Methodist Church to a June gathering of Indiana United Methodists.

After retiring as bishop of the UMC's Central Texas Conference, Lowry became the first bishop of the Global Methodist Church.

"Not just the Methodist Church, but the Christian movement in America has married the present age...it is past time for that to change," Lowry said.

Lowry insisted: "The GMC's new movement will involve rejecting the dominant fads and fancies of contemporary culture, regardless of whether they come from the left or the right."

"The GMC will be explicitly and consciously Christ-centered," Lowry pledged. "What is faith? What faith is it through which we are saved?" Lowry said we are saved only by faith in Christ. It is not "a barely speculative rational thing" nor "a train of ideas in the head." Lowry added, "the Global Methodist Church is seeking to birth a Holy Spirit movement." The defining feature of the GMC is Christ at the center.

Second, "the GMC will seek to consciously and explicitly reclaim a doctrine of sanctification, holiness, heart, and life," Lowry declared, noting **John Wesley** said: "this distinctive understanding of faith alone and holy living are held together." The GMC's holiness means both personal and social or corporate holiness. Like **William Wilberforce's** fight against slavery and advocacy for women's rights, "we in the GMC are to be about the business of adding the abiding presence of Christian life," Lowry declared.

Third, "the GMC will consciously and explicitly engage in evangelism." Lowry cited missionary **D.T. Niles'** definition of evangelism: "It is one beggar telling another beggar where to get food." The bishop emphasized that the evangelical Niles not only believed Christians should stand alongside the non-Christians but also point to the Gospel, the holy action of God.

Lowry recalled a young minister's experience to illustrate what the GMC should look like. **Jesus Molina** and his wife, **Lili**, came from Venezuela. In Texas, a local pastor taught them about Methodism. Later, Molina became a worship leader at First Methodist Church in Waxahachie, Texas, with a

Spanish-language service. The ministry shared the Gospel with unreached people.

This church, with only one seminary trained staffer, has "a sold-out commitment for Jesus Christ as Lord," Lowry noted. After less than two years, there's already a second site in Grapevine, Texas. Recently forty-nine people were baptized at a nearby lake.

"This scene would not be considered foreign or even unusual in early American Methodism," Lowry said. "The Global Methodist Church is committed to a vision of life in a renewed local congregation."

Lowry said the lake baptisms show life transformation through Jesus Christ. Other signs are real conversion regularly in a local church, ethnic and economic diversity, a high Christology with



Bishop Mike Lowry (Photo credit: Steve Beard)

biblical authority, growing awareness of the Holy Spirit's power and presence, indigenous leadership with spiritual and theological formation, and a firm commitment to historic Christian orthodoxy.

Lowry stressed that Global Methodism must reach the middle as well as the working classes, and also "reclaim an orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, moving away from a vague Unitarian theological emphasis found in many of today's seminary-educated clergy."

Lowry concluded: "A renewed Methodism in the GMC, sharing Christ to people frozen in place...This is the task which I believe the Lord creates the Global Methodist Church to be and be about, no more nor less." ✝

Liberal Leaders Demand UMC Become ‘Queer’ Denomination

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer-affirming current and aspiring United Methodist clergy were recently featured by the church’s unofficial but powerful LGBTQ caucus to discuss their hopes for a “sexually liberated” and “queer denomination” following the model of the liberal and declining Episcopal Church.

representing the Upper New York Annual Conference at the 2019 General Conference, Warren made an impassioned plea for the denomination to be LGBTQ-affirming.

“Queering is a process of perpetual subversion,” Warren favorably quoted the Rev. Dr. **Brandon Crowley**, lecturer in Ministry Studies at Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The young UMC clergy candidate believes United Methodism could progress to perfection through a continuous re-examination process. “I hope we will be a church that challenges its own assumptions...a church that is sexually liberated. ...” Warren insisted.

Bridgeforth, director of Innovation and Communication for the California-Pacific Annual Conference, proposed that the UMC become a church that includes “every hue, every shade, every thought, every idea.” He emphasized that the UMC actively engages in social issues “around voter suppression and affordable housing, an equitable economy...inclusion and embrace for all of us who identify as queer; LGBTQ...” He firmly believes that “if we’re not focused on impact, we’re...wasting each other’s time. ...”

“I also dream for the church that is for all-inclusive and for everybody,” Pérez, pastor of the OASIS United Methodist Church in Pleasantville, New Jersey, affirmed.

Only eight percent of American United Methodism’s congregations come from minority ethnic groups, Pérez noted, urging the UMC to become more diverse. “That’s a big problem...we can share with them this theology that we have that reaches out to everybody,” Pérez insisted.

Lawrence asked the panel: “What do you think the UMC has to learn from our ecumenical siblings this season?”

Warren answered that the post-separation UMC should learn from the Episcopal Church’s precedent. In 2015 the Episcopal Church’s General Convention voted to revise its constitution and canons regulating marriage, permitting any couple access to a gender-neutral marriage rite.

“As we think about the church and people who don’t share our vision, just knowing that...we [queer-identifying members] live in a big connection and that there are people with so many gifts,” Warren stated.

Warren said that engaging in conversations where he has to defend himself as a gay man is spiritually harmful, arguing that there have to be “some core principles about what it means to be the UMC.” He declared that the principle should be a welcoming doormat that affirms the goodness of everyone to come into a conversation about LGBTQ identity. ✚



The Rev. Lyssette N. Pérez (top) and J.J. Warren spoke at a Reconciling Ministries Network seminar on their hopes for a future LGBTQ-affirming post-separation United Methodist Church (Photos: Greater New Jersey Annual Conference, UMNS)

Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN) Executive Director **Jan Lawrence** hosted the Rev. **Lyssette N. Pérez**, the Rev. Dr. **Cedrick Bridgeforth**, and **J.J. Warren** for an online seminar in which the panel members were asked about their “wildest dreams” for a post-separation UMC.

The UMC should become a “queer denomination” to move forward to perfection, proposed Warren, a certified candidate for ordination who identifies as gay. As a lay reserve delegate



Bishops process into worship on Feb. 24, 2019, at the special session of the General Conference of The United Methodist Church, held in St. Louis, Missouri. (Photo: Paul Jeffrey/UMNS)

Churches Should Exit Now

If there is any way your congregation is able to leave United Methodism by next year's deadline under *Book of Discipline* paragraph 2553 you will own your church property, have more authority over your next pastoral appointment, no longer subsidize the United Methodist bureaucracy, and be able to plan for a hopeful future. You can join the new Global Methodist Church, or any other denomination.

United Methodist properties are legally held "in trust" for the denomination. But the 2019 General Conference adopted an exceptional law, effectively expiring in less than one year, allowing churches to vote themselves out of the denomination (see cover story). They retain their property and pay two years worth of apportionments plus clergy pension liabilities. (Sadly, some resentful bishops are adding exorbitant surcharges, which for some churches may result in litigation.)

Liberation from an imploding denomination is a bargain at almost any price. USA United Methodism is dying. It's lost 5 million members and as of 2020 was losing 200,000 members annually. The pandemic, during which thousands of churches closed for much of if not more than a year, and the unfolding schism will dramatically accelerate this loss. The average age for American United Methodists is near 60 and climbing. USA United Methodism is over 90% white and largely incapable of reaching non-whites and immigrants. American United Methodism has almost no capacity to plant successful new churches. Instead, it closes hundreds of churches annually.

United Methodism has an unsustainable 1960s bureaucracy built for a church that had 11 million in the USA but now has 6 million. In 2021, its U.S. congregations were charged some \$155 million in "general church" (i.e., denomination-wide) apportionments, including nearly \$80 million for general agencies, \$24 million for bishops, and \$27 million for ministerial education (mainly funding seminaries). Additionally, United Methodism has guaranteed thousands of employees nearly lifetime employment regardless of competence.

You can proclaim the Gospel without interference from a dying denomination. Begin the exit process now. Time is short. ✝

UMAction Briefing

A newsletter for United Methodists working for Scripture-based renewal and reform in our denomination

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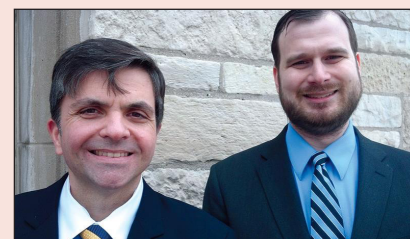
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