

The Divisive Disconnection of the UMC Connectional Table

While General Conference is our denomination’s supreme governing body, between these once-in-four-years rule-making gatherings, the body that regularly convenes representatives from every major denominational power structure is the Connectional Table (CT). Various CT membership slots are allotted to the Council of Bishops, our denomination’s general agencies, several American ethnic caucuses, and every major geographic division (called “jurisdictions” in the United States and “central conferences” overseas) of our global church.



Participants at the autumn 2015 Connectional Table meeting debate lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender matters in The United Methodist Church. (Photo: Kathleen S. Barry/UMNS)

One should expect this general administrative oversight body to be interested in bringing United Methodists together across every regional, theological, and organizational divide. But under the leadership of its chair for the 2013–2016 quadrennium, Bishop Bruce Ough of the Dakotas-Minnesota Area, it has often chosen to act more like a factional caucus group representing only a narrowly liberal, Western minority of the UMC, rather than our whole church. In its very first meeting of this quadrennium, the CT leadership set the tone by attacking non-liberal United Methodists. Liberal activists have pushed (and continue to push) proposals nicknamed “the Global Segregation Plan” to try to create a new structure to allow the more theologically liberal U.S. wing of our global church to make decisions without any voice or input from generally more biblically grounded overseas delegates. A series of proposed amendments to our denomination’s constitution were overwhelmingly defeated in 2009. It was opposed by 95 percent of African United Methodists, who saw through supporters’ misleading propaganda to understand that its primary practical effect would have been to drastically curtail African influence in the life of our denomination. Yet rather than seek to listen to the majority of the church, the CT has instead chosen to host speakers to harshly attack the renewal groups (such as *UMAction*) that had opposed this plan and to suggest that a U.S.-only body, with no international delegates, would

have the votes to liberalize the church’s standards on marriage and homosexuality, a change the CT leadership openly desires. Since this first meeting the CT leadership has insisted on promoting a revised version of this already-rejected agenda. The CT leadership has chosen to uniquely privilege liberal caucus activists while dismissively ignoring more conservative United Methodists. It partnered with the “DreamUMC” social-media project led by strident liberal caucus activists for one dialogue session, while forming no such partnership with any conservative-led group. Observers with no official CT affiliation are usually not invited to speak at CT meetings, but exceptions were made at multiple meetings this quadrennium for only one group: Love Prevails, a self-described “radical sexual liberationist” group led by Amy DeLong. The stated goals of Love Prevails include disrupting church leadership meetings and encouraging people to stop attending or even praying for United Methodist churches who will not support their agenda. Love Prevails activists have been allowed to inject their gay-rights agenda, even at inappropriate times, and to completely derail and re-order meeting business schedules to give the activists hours and hours to promote themselves. Meanwhile, the CT declined to invite either *UMAction* or Lifewatch (a pro-life caucus) to a planned dialogue with various caucus groups. More orthodox believers who are rightful CT members have been marginalized and pushed aside to create time for the unelected, unaccountable Love Prevails activists to speak as much as they want. Several of the bishops who are CT members have fallen over themselves to pander to Love Prevails activists. They introduced a motion to formally commit the CT to the goal of liberalizing our sexuality standards. CT leaders rushed through this move without bothering to seek input from any United Methodists from Africa, where 40 percent of our denomination lives. As a result, the CT is submitting a petition to the 2016 General Conference to change the UMC’s definition of marriage to include same-sex couples, and to remove the current basis in United Methodist church law preventing our ministers from performing same-sex union services or personally being homosexually active. At one point, Bishop Ough openly thanked Love Prevails for its disruption, thus encouraging and rewarding their bad behavior. Our bishops elected Ough to not only lead the CT this quadrennium, but also to become the next Council of Bishops president. ✚

ACTION: Encourage others to support *UMAction*’s work to defeat the CT’s General Conference petition. Write to Bishop Christian Alsted, Bishop of the Nordic and Baltic Area in Northern Europe, who is not currently part of the CT but who has been elected to take its helm after Bishop Ough’s term ends next year. Respectfully urge Bishop Alsted to lead the CT in a less divisive direction: bishop@umc-ne.org

Surveys: U.S. United Methodists Remain Split on Homosexuality

United Methodist Communications recently released comparative results of two surveys on the social views of American United Methodists. One was conducted in late 2014 and the second in late summer 2015, after the U.S. Supreme Court’s landmark ruling redefining marriage to include same-sex couples. The survey separated results for “pastors” (which for this survey included ordained clergy, licensed local pastors, and lay preachers) and “leaders” (defined as “lay people in church leadership roles including Sunday school teachers, trustees and church committee members”). After the court ruling, a majority of U.S. United Methodist pastors and leaders (54 percent in each category) still support our denomination’s rule banning same-sex union ceremonies. Compared to the 2014 survey, this represents a decline from 59 percent for the pastors but an increase from 50 percent of involved, non-nominal lay members supporting our biblical standards. In contrast to their United Methodist neighbors, a Pew Research survey after the Supreme Court ruling found that among Americans in general, 57 favored and 39 percent opposed the redefinition of marriage. While it is disappointing not to see a stronger majority of American United Methodists supporting biblical standards, these results need to be understood in context. For some time, the popular narrative has been that the overwhelming majority of United Methodists in the United States favor the gay marriage cause. However, the results of the United Methodist Communications survey provide hope for continued United Methodist adherence to biblical values, even as American culture moves in a very different direction. Meanwhile, we should always remember that we are a global denomination, with 40 percent of United Methodists living overseas, where our members are overwhelmingly opposed to church endorsement of any type of sexual sin. ✚

FOR REFLECTION: *John 17:13–19; Romans 12:1–2; James 1:27.*
ACTION: Commit to praying regularly for revival within our denomination.

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Shepherd of all of God’s people.” The statement was signed by all thirteen active bishops in Africa as well as by retired Bishop Arthur Kulah of Liberia. ✚

ACTION: Write to Bishop Eben Nhwatiwa of Zimbabwe (bishop nhwatiwa@yahoo.co.uk), President of the African College of Bishops, and Bishop John Yambasu of Sierra Leone (bishop yambasu@gmail.com), who reportedly coordinated the statement, to let them know that you and other American United Methodists appreciate their bold, prophetic leadership.

UMAction Briefing

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IRD President Mark Tooley and
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UMAction Briefing

GOOD NEWS: African Bishops Offer Leadership on Terrorism, Biblical Authority, Marriage

It was the shot heard ’round the United Methodist world. During the November meeting of our global Council of Bishops, the African bishops of our denomination released a strong joint statement addressing the scourge of Islamic terrorism around the globe, and our United Methodist Church’s internal crisis over biblical authority and sexual morality. The statement’s visibility was greatly enhanced when Bishop Lindsey Davis had it posted on the website of the Kentucky Annual Conference, which he leads. The African bishops specifically decried the horrors being inflicted on much of the world by the Islamic extremist groups, ISIS in Syria, Boko Haram in West Africa, and Al-Shabaab in East Africa. They called on African political

leaders and the United Nations “to do all that lies within their power to restore peace and tranquility” while committing to doing their part in praying and working for peace.

Within the UMC, they expressed “shock and dismay” at factions in our denomination

embracing sin, including the LGBT agenda, resulting in a conflict that “now threatens to rip the Church apart.” The African bishops were refreshingly forthright in identifying biblical authority as the root issue behind our debates over sexual morality, decrying how some United Methodist leaders have been ignoring both Scripture and our governing *Book of Discipline* to endorse “social and cultural practices that have no scriptural basis for acceptance in Christian worship and conduct.”

Among other things, the African bishops invited United Methodists at all levels and in all regions of our denomination to join them in “an unreserved commitment to the Holy Bible as the primary authority for faith and practice in the church.” They compassionately expressed their desire to be in ministry with people not yet living Christian lifestyles. But they stood strong in affirming the gift of sexual relations within the covenant of man-woman marriage, while denouncing such sinful sexual practices as “fornication, adultery, sexual commercialization, slavery, abuse, polygamy, etc.”

They specifically called on the whole Council of Bishops “to commit to demonstrating their shepherding responsibility (1 Peter 5:2-4) by acting consistently with the Holy Bible,” suggesting that a bishop unwilling to do so “must recuse himself or herself from the divine call to be

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United Methodist bishops in Africa (Photo: Andra Stevens/UMNS)

United Methodist-Supported Abortion Coalition Vows to Continue Ignoring UMC Position

The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC) is a well-funded political lobbying group that stridently opposes any restrictive regulation of or even moral opposition to abortion.

Some Protestant denominations whose leadership was initially supportive of this 1973-founded group—such as the American Baptists, Moravians, and Southern Baptists—have since ended their ties with RCRC. Other decidedly liberal, “mainline” denominations—such as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—have chosen to never affiliate with RCRC.

And yet our United Methodist Church remains a formal RCRC partner, with two of our denominational agencies—United Methodist Women (UMW) and the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS)—being enthusiastic “member organizations” of RCRC.

The United Methodist Church’s current official position is moderately “pro-choice,” affirming abortion as a legal right while opposing it as a means of birth control or gender selection. Over the years, *UMAction* has worked with other pro-life United Methodists to successfully add incremental improvements, such

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GOOD NEWS: Thriving United Methodist Congregation Offers ‘Immersion School’ for Training Pastors

We hear much about the decline of our denomination in the U.S. But over the last seven years, Christ United Methodist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, has seen 14,000 people profess Christian faith for the first time, and helped plant 140 new congregations.

Inspired by the early Methodist system of highly accountable small groups (“classes” and “bands”), this congregation has now launched an “Immersion School” to train pastors, church staff, and laypeople in effective ways of discipling others. This training method allows participants to continue working in their ministry contexts, not requiring them to change location except for monthly cohort meetings.

- Christ Church’s Immersion School is organized around four key principles:
- 1. Altering our Spiritual DNA:** It seeks to provide “a deeply immersive experience that has the potential of altering our spiritual DNA.” As Christ Church’s senior pastor, the Rev. Paul Lawler explained to *UMAction*, “It is foolish to think we could develop people who are going to ‘transform the world’ without providing immersive pathways of experiencing deep transformation.”
 - 2. Aiming at Intentional Discipleship:** Rev. Lawler says that for years he has received only negative answers when asking seminary graduates if their degree would teach them how to effectively disciple a group of a dozen people interested in regularly meeting together to explore God. So the Immersion School is designed for “equipping everybody, lay and clergy, in effective patterns of intentional disciple-making for the transformation of the world.”
 - 3. Depth that Fuels Breadth:** The Immersion School offers “living environments” in which students can be deeply immersed in the Person of Christ, and from this foundation proceed to pursue his broad mission.

4. A Different Kind of Learning Matrix: Rather than mirroring a typical school environment, the Immersion School mixes teaching theology and methodology with spiritual mentoring, experiential learning in spiritual disciplines, and stretching students with hands-on ministry. As Lawler told us, this is all designed to “equip people in launching and multiplying movements for the glory of God.” ✚

FOR REFLECTION: *On the biblical discipleship that can occur in high-commitment small groups, see Galatians 6:1–6; Philipians 2:1–11; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 10:24–25.*

ACTION: *To learn more about possibly joining the next Immersion School, contact the Rev. Paul Lawler: plawler@christchurchtv.org or Christ UMC / 5091 Caldwell Mill Road / Birmingham, AL 35242.*

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as expressing support for crisis pregnancy centers “that compassionately help women find feasible alternatives to abortions,” committing our church to lowering abortion rates, calling abortion “violent,” and adding opposition to partial-birth abortions and abortion as a means of eugenics. At the last General Conference, we came very close to persuading the UMC to both adopt a completely pro-life position and end the membership of UMW and the GBCS in RCRC.

Meanwhile, leaders of UMW and the GBCS have attempted to convince General Conference to shift our denomination’s position in a less life affirming, more abortion-supportive direction.

Against this background, the Rev. Kathryn Johnson, RCRC’s program director, told attendees at a “Gather at the River” conference of liberal United Methodist caucuses in August that she realized that RCRC would be under scrutiny at our denomination’s upcoming May 2016 General Conference, the supreme governing body of our global denomination. She candidly said, “We know we won’t have to have approval of the General Conference to do the work we need to do.” She defiantly declared, “What happens at General Conference stays at General Conference!” No matter what General Conference decides, she insisted, “Our work will go on.”

RCRC has been criticized for its direct attacks on pro-life parts of the official UMC position, such as our “belief in the sanctity of unborn human life,” support for crisis pregnancy centers, and opposition to abortion in many circumstances. RCRC has also very vocally opposed UMC standards affirming church policies as well as “laws in civil society” limiting marriage to one man and one woman.

Yet the RCRC spokeswoman made it clear that no matter how much more pro-life the official United Methodist position may become, this UMC-endorsed coalition will not moderate its advocacy one bit to avoid further conflicts with the UMC stance. It is worth noting that Johnson has long been involved in radical causes in our church, having previously led the Methodist Federation for Social Action and more recently co-officiated at a publicity-stunt same-sex union, in open defiance of church rules prohibiting such “sin blessings.”

Some have argued that it is valuable for the UMC to remain affiliated with RCRC, since “having a seat at the table” gives us influence. But the United Methodists involved in RCRC are individuals like Johnson, who are openly committed to having RCRC



Members of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice “bless” an abortion clinic. (Photo: Ohio Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice)

ignore and oppose more life-affirming parts of the UMC’s official position. So the United Methodist “seat at the table” has done nothing to moderate RCRC’s militant extremism or to stop it from directly opposing official UMC positions. Our “seat at the table” has not stopped RCRC from showing such callous disregard for unborn human life as even promoting ceremonies to bless abortion clinics and calling all the elective abortions they perform, no matter the circumstances, “holy work” and “God’s work.” Our continued RCRC affiliation attaches our denomination’s name and implied endorsement to all of these RCRC stances and activities. And folk making the “seat at the table” argument do not urge United Methodist agencies to join pro-life coalitions.

Our UMC’s continued RCRC affiliation links our denomination to some bizarre non-Christian religious entities, such as self-described “Wiccan high priestess” Judy Harrow (who wrote an essay for an RCRC website arguing that “All consensual sex is good, even when it is simply a pleasure shared between friends”), and atheist billionaire George Soros as well as the Playboy pornography company (both of whom have funded RCRC to provide a religious “cover” for their support of unlimited abortion). This alienates our denomination from the wider body of Christ, which has strongly opposed abortion since the first century. ✚

FOR REFLECTION: *Mark 10:13–16; Luke 1:39–44; 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1.*

ACTION: *Contact the General Conference delegates from your annual conference and respectfully urge them to support petitions to end our denomination’s scandalous affiliation with RCRC, and to support efforts to ensure that the Conference prioritizes this important decision, so that it does not run out of time for a final vote on the matter (as happened at the last General Conference). Organize others in your church to do likewise. Please contact us if you need help locating the names and contact information for the delegates elected from your area.*

UMAction Testifies Against Israel Divestment

On November 12, *UMAction* Director John Lomperis testified before our denomination’s General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits. This board, along with other leadership bodies of the United Methodist Church, has been under pressure by activists for the Palestinian cause to divest from specific companies described as “profiting from the Israeli occupation.” Our UMC’s controversial DC lobby office, along with others, is petitioning General Conference along these lines, particularly to divest United Methodist holdings from the Caterpillar construction company.

We explained how these companies were specifically targeted as part of a wider, more radical agenda known as “BDS”—promoting comprehensive boycotts, divestment, and sanctions against the Jewish state. We explained how BDS activists openly admit that their targeting of specific companies like Caterpillar is “part and parcel” of the wider BDS campaign, with the targeted companies being selected based on nakedly political calculations for what they think are winnable battles, while realizing that such PR campaign will neither have much economic impact nor target the companies they believe are actually more complicit in human-rights abuses.

We exposed the fallacy of the narrative that Israel is a Western colonial occupying power, explaining how this area is the historic homeland of the Jewish people, with a continuous Jewish presence since biblical times. We also explained details typically ignored by pro-divestment activists, such as the threats Israel was facing in the 1967 war that resulted in the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the many Israeli lives saved from terrorism by

the security fence that the GBCS faults Caterpillar for helping construct, Israel’s geopolitically vulnerable position of occupying a tiny strip of land surrounded by many nations that refuse to recognize its basic right to exist, and the willingness of many Israelis to let Palestinians have their own nation if only they could secure guarantees that such a new neighbor would not immediately attack Israel. We also highlighted some of the blatant anti-Semitism tainting the divest-from-Caterpillar movement.

We pointed out major moral inconsistencies on the part of United Methodist divestment activists, such as their promoting divestment from democratic Israel while encouraging investment in totalitarian North Korea.

We shared survey data showing how attaching our church’s name to this fringe anti-Israel agenda would alienate the UMC from our mission field and much of our own membership in North America.

And even if one were to accept the divestment activists’ propaganda that Israel is the only blameworthy party—with there being no need to criticize Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, or others—we shared a point made by one of the GBCS’s own directors about how divestment was likely to provoke worse, not better, Israeli behavior. ✚

ACTION: *You can read the full testimony by going to www.theird.org/united-methodist/ and looking under the date November 13, 2015. Then contact General Conference delegates from your area and respectfully urge them to vote against all petitions pushing divestment and other anti-Israel rhetoric.*

Please recruit other believers to sign our www.methodistsaffirmingmarriage.com online petition!

Yes, I (we) want to help *UMAction* inform United Methodists and their families about the urgent need for church reform and faithfulness

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Your Opinion, Please!

How would you like to see UMC officials address the Arab-Israeli conflict?

- Defend Israel
- Avoid taking sides
- Mainly criticize Israel, but without pushing divestment
- Divest from Israel