

UMAction

Briefing



GOOD NEWS: Fastest Growing Large UMC Congregations Remain Concentrated Among Evangelical Pastors, Conservative Regions

Earlier in 2018, **Len Wilson**, Creative Director at St. Andrew UMC in Plano, Texas, published his yearly list of the fastest growing large United Methodist congregations in the U.S.

To qualify for the list, a congregation must have had at least 1,000 in average weekly attendance (AWA) by the end of 2016, the most recent year for which full data was available. Wilson's annual lists measure growth in terms of reported AWA for the last five years on record.

This year's list (once again!) features The Woodlands UMC, whose senior pastor, the Rev. Dr. **Ed Robb**, is a member of our UMAction Advisory Board.

As UMAction observed in previous years, the churches on this list are again overwhelmingly Southern. Eleven (almost half) are in the Southeastern Jurisdiction, another year of top representation from the most conservative of U.S. jurisdictions. Another six (24 percent) are in the South Central Jurisdiction. Only one congregation, Gold Canyon UMC, hails from the very liberal, geographically huge but low-membership Western Jurisdiction.

Asbury Theological Seminary, a bastion of evangelical Methodism, continues to train many more senior pastors of these rapidly growing large churches than any other school. The Kentucky-based institution

trained nine of the pastors on this list, almost double that of Candler, which produced five. Seven of our denomination's 13 official seminaries (Claremont, Duke, Garrett, Iliff, Saint Paul, Wesley, and the Methodist Theological School in Ohio) did not have a single known graduate on the 2018 list.

After examining the personal theologies of these senior pastors, we found that it is a strongly orthodox and evangelical group; 68 percent of these top-growing United Methodist churches are led by a pastor who exhibits a biblical, evangelical theological perspective.

As in previous years, not one church on the list is a "Reconciling" congregation, formally affiliated with Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN) in its

See GOOD NEWS: Fastest Growing Large UMC Congregations, page 5

Winter 2018–2019

Inside:

Judicial Council Clarifies Stakes for 2019 General Conference	2
GOOD NEWS: UMC Bishop Joins Catholic Bishop in Opposing Euthanasia.	3
Midwestern Hispanic Caucus Endorses Traditional Plan.	4
Campus Minister Highlights Slippery Slope	4
The Ugly Legacy Behind Some of the Movement for Sexual Liberation in the UMC.	5



Rev. Ed Robb, Senior Pastor of The Woodlands UMC and UMAction Advisory Board Member. (Photo: The Woodlands UMC)

Judicial Council Clarifies Stakes for 2018 General Conference

Our denomination's high court, the Judicial Council, met in late October in Switzerland to review the constitutionality of the three alternative plans proposed to the special February 23–26, 2019 General Conference as part of the final report of the Commission on a Way Forward. The Judicial Council's job was NOT to judge which ideas were wiser or more faithful, but only to determine if any parts of any of these comprehensive plans would impermissibly conflict with the most foundational part of our church law, the 20 pages at the beginning of our governing *Book of Discipline* known as the UMC Constitution.

The Council declined to evaluate the Connectional Conference Plan, a creative compromise that would divide the UMC into geographically overlapping divisions, each with their own values and rules on sexual morality, and would require amending the UMC Constitution in several places. This plan has attracted little support so far. With both the Traditional Plan and the very liberal, misleadingly named “One Church” Plan, the Judicial Council ruled some parts to be unconstitutional but upheld the majority of the plans, so that some version of both plans will be considered at the 2019 General Conference.

The process has clarified how much is at stake as our denomination decides between these two most likely paths forward.

The main plan to liberalize our denomination's standards is being misleadingly marketed by the liberal-dominated Council of Bishops as “the One Church Plan” (OCP), even though it is most guaranteed to split apart our church. We have earlier observed how this plan would:

- Go *much further* than a true “local option” by liberalizing the definition of marriage for ALL United Methodists around the world, requiring United Methodists to accept same-sex “weddings” in EVERY part of America, and removing the church-law basis for defrocking homosexually active clergy anywhere
- Impose an unfunded mandate on United Methodists in overseas regions who wish to maintain traditionalist standards even in only their own areas
- Eventually bring the most divisive debates and votes of General Conference to every local congregation
- Purge the UMC of bishops, district superintendents, boards of ordained ministry members, and new ordination candidates who could not in good conscience affirm the OCP's new liberal standards

- Otherwise trample on the consciences of traditionalist United Methodists, despite misleading assurances to the contrary

With the Judicial Council's ruling, these problems have remained or worsened. The biggest part of the OCP that was deemed unconstitutional would have required bishops to move pastors to other congregations if they were in “unresolved disagreements over same-sex marriage” with their current congregations. After this ruling, one of the OCP's main public promoters was quick to publicly dismiss this provision as not critical to the overall plan. So under the OCP now, conservative congregations would have no firm way of refusing to accept a pastor who was homosexually active or who was known to officiate same-sex unions.

Aside from the final ruling, this whole process of legal review has clarified what is at stake with the OCP. First of all, by redefining Christian marriage to potentially include same-sex couples and affirming the acceptability of homosexual practice by ministers, the OCP would divorce our denomination from core, historic Methodist theology. From the beginning of Methodism, John

Wesley's “Standard” Sermons and *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* have served as, in the words of the present UMC *Discipline*, “the traditional standard exposition of distinctive Methodist teaching.” Amidst dozens of written briefs officially submitted by various parties in this review process, several highlighted how the OCP's homosexuality-affirming teachings and standards would directly contradict the teachings of these core Wesleyan documents related to marriage and sexual morality. Not one OCP defender disputed this.

Secondly, the OCP would disenfranchise the laity, imposing a new level of clericalism. Currently, our denomination's ordination standards are determined by General Conference, which is *equally* divided between clergy and lay delegates. In the course of defending the OCP to the Judicial Council, the plan's main submitter, Pastor **Tom Berlin** of Virginia, argued that members of each annual conference, “lay and clergy alike,” have a right to determine general policies related to ordination standards. However, he and other drafters of the plan ultimately decided that under the OCP, binding decisions on whether or not an annual conference would ordain openly homosexually active clergy would only be made by that conference's clergy session, from which laypeople are largely excluded.



Bishop Cynthia Fierro Harvey defending the One Church Plan to the Judicial Council (Photo: Diane Degnan / UMCCom)

See *Judicial Council Clarifies Stakes for 2019*, page 3



GOOD NEWS: UMC Bishop Joins Catholic Bishop in Opposing Euthanasia

Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia of the Roman Catholic Church and Bishop Scott Jones of the UMC hold the Joint Declaration. Photo courtesy PCSlife.org.

president of the Pontifical Academy for Life, recently signed the Joint Declaration on the End of Life and Palliative Care. With this declaration, the medical professionals and religious leaders gathered in Houston for a conference on “Palliative Care and Spirituality for Life” reaffirmed traditional church teachings on the sanctity of life. Official teachings of both the United Methodist and Roman Catholic churches oppose euthanasia, said the declaration, because “the taking of a life” was “an offense against God’s sole dominion over life, and abandonment of hope and humility before God, and an affront to the dignity of and the solidarity among human beings.”

The Joint Declaration focused primarily on Christians’ duty to provide pastoral care and comfort to the dying. “Because Christian faith is relevant to every aspect of life,” it said, “no one should be expected to cope with life’s pain, suffering, and ultimate death without the help of God through other people.”

The document’s specific language “reject[ing] euthanasia and any pressure on the dying to end their lives” has been part of the UMC’s official Social Principles for years. However, the denomination’s far-left General Board of Church and Society (GBCS)

United Methodists and Roman Catholics, facilitated by the Houston Methodist Research Institute, united to strongly “reject euthanasia and any pressure on the dying to end their lives.”

United Methodist Bishop **Scott Jones** of the Texas Annual Conference and Catholic Archbishop **Vincenzo Paglia**,

See **GOOD NEWS: UMC Bishop Joins Catholic Bishop in Opposing Euthanasia**, page 6

Judicial Council Clarifies Stakes for 2019 General Conference *continued from page 2*

Thirdly, defenses of the OCP before the Judicial Council spoke of how the UMC, in the immediate aftermath of adopting the plan, would be in an “awkward” transition period, and that there should be toleration for the consciences of traditionalist United Methodists during this time. This raises questions of when this temporary toleration would expire.

Meanwhile, despite widespread misinformation by some liberal activists, the Judicial Council ruling left open pathways for adopting the five main elements of the Traditional Plan, which would maintain our denomination’s biblical standards by:

- Tightening the screening of new clergy to exclude openly homosexually active candidates
- Strengthening several enforcement mechanisms to better ensure accountability for clergy who violate our rules against performing same-sex unions
- Strengthening accountability for bishops to do their job of upholding these standards
- Requiring every annual conference to make a one-time choice between either upholding these standards or being sanctioned and encouraged to leave the UMC
- Allowing gracious exits for congregations to leave the denomination with their property

Liberal arguments submitted to the Judicial Council particularly targeted the strengthened enforcement proposals. But the Council upheld the constitutionality of almost every proposal of the Traditional Plan in this area. Legal briefs defending the Traditional Plan were submitted by the Rev. **Tom Lambrecht** (Vice President of Good News and main submitter of this plan) and **UMAction** Director **John Lomperis**.

Concerns raised by the Council about other parts of the Traditional Plan could be addressed with relatively simple wording changes in a few key places. The main exception is how the ruling invalidated the Traditional Plan’s original system of enhanced accountability for bishops. But months ago, **UMAction** and other renewal groups had already moved on to support an alternative proposal for bishops’ accountability, submitted by the Rev. Dr. **Maxie Dunnam**, which we do not expect to face the same constitutional barrier.

The choice is now in the hands of 864 General Conference delegates from around the world. ✚

FOR REFLECTION: James 5:13-18.

ACTION: Commit to PRAYING (and perhaps also fasting) regularly for the February 23-26, 2019, General Conference, and recruit like-minded prayer warriors to join you.

Midwestern Hispanic Caucus Endorses Traditional Plan

The North Central Jurisdiction (NCJ) Hispanic Caucus within the United Methodist Church has formally endorsed the Traditional Plan (see “Judicial Council Clarifies,” p. 2) as the denomination’s best “way forward” at the 2019 General Conference. This caucus is the oldest and most well-established jurisdictional Hispanic/Latino caucus in our denomination. The February 2019 General Conference in St. Louis has been specially called for the sole purpose of seeking to resolve our denomination’s internal tensions over homosexuality and accountability.

This endorsement was made at the Caucus’s 34th Annual Gathering, held in late September with the theme of *Transformed to Transform the World*. It included dozens of lay and clergy delegates from Hispanic/Latino congregations from several states across the North Central Jurisdiction.

The assembled Hispanic pastors and lay delegates voted nearly unanimously to endorse the Traditional Plan, reportedly with only a handful of dissenting votes.

This resolution, which was introduced by this Caucus’s leadership, also recalled how previous Annual Gatherings of the NCJ Hispanic Caucus had supported a theologically traditionalist approach to sexual morality.

Individuals involved in the NCJ Hispanic Caucus have said that the people in our denomination’s Hispanic/Latino congregations generally tend to be more traditionalist in their theology, and that if something like the One Church Plan were to be adopted by the 2019 General Conference, then a number of such ethnic congregations, in the Western Jurisdiction and elsewhere, would leave the UMC. ✚



Rev. Jorge Mayorga Solis, Wisconsin Conference Director of Congregational Development, teaching at the NCJ Hispanic Caucus’s Annual Assembly on how to grow healthy congregations.

ACTION: Write to the delegates from your annual conference and strongly but politely urge them to support the Traditional Plan as the main plan that is faithful to Scripture and that would prevent us from splitting apart as other “mainline” denominations have done. If you would like contact information for your conference’s delegates, please email umaction@theird.org with “WHO ARE MY DELEGATES?” in the Subject line.

Campus Minister Highlights Slippery Slope

Recent public writings by the Rev. **Roger Wolsey**, a United Methodist campus minister, demonstrate the moral and theological chaos to which paths of rejecting clear biblical teachings can lead.

In one recent blog post, he declared:

Friends, Jesus isn’t God. Jesus didn’t die for our sins. Jesus wasn’t killed instead of us. God isn’t wrathful or vindictive. There isn’t a hell (other than ones that we create here on this earth). Going to heaven after we die isn’t what the faith or salvation is about. God didn’t write the Bible. ... Jesus’ resurrection didn’t have to be understood as a physical one for it to be a real and meaningful one.... (emphasis in original)

In another post, he frankly admitted a self-serving motive for being an outspoken “straight ally” of the LGBTQ liberationist cause:

One of the main reasons that I have been such a strong advocate for LGBTQ rights over the past few decades is because I realize that as I fight for their liberation, I fight for my own. I’m a divorced Christian who hopes to marry again someday and I jolly well will have sex with a future lover prior to getting married again some day. (emphasis in original)

This follows a pattern we have repeatedly seen of churches and clergy that follow Wolsey’s invitations to “grow up about sex,” by rejecting biblical teaching against homosexual practice, finding it difficult to adopt any sexual ethic stricter than “anything goes, as long as it’s consensual.” Our denomination’s homosexuality debates are inextricably linked with whether or not we will maintain traditional biblical sexual ethics for all people, including in heterosexual contexts related to questions about pornography, purity, self-control, and fidelity.

See Campus Minister Highlights Slippery Slope, page 6

The Ugly Legacy Behind Some of the Movement for Sexual Liberation in the UMC

Who amassed what was reportedly the world's largest pornography collection?

This dubious honor goes to Rev. **Robert "Ted" McIlvenna**, a United Methodist minister in the California-Nevada Conference who passed away in late August. McIlvenna spearheaded the collection of over 3 *million* pornographic books, magazines, videotapes, films, and photographs, some of which he was involved in producing himself. To house his decades-long "work," he co-founded the Erotic Heritage Museum in Las Vegas with strip club magnate **Harry Mohnhey**.

It is worth considering his legacy as a leading activist laying the intellectual foundations for acceptance in and beyond the UMC of

homosexuality and other non-traditional sexual practices.

McIlvenna had served only a few years as a local church pastor when he began working for some of our denominational agencies concerned with youth ministry and religious education, and the infamously radical Glide Memorial United Methodist Church in San Francisco. (You may remember

this as the same infamously post-Christian "church" out of which openly partnered lesbian activist **Karen Oliveto**, who teaches that Jesus Christ needed to be converted out of "his bigotries and prejudices," was illegitimately elected bishop by the Western Jurisdiction in 2016.) But McIlvenna spent the majority of his career leading his own organizations as a "sexologist" who believe he was on a "sacred" quest to document "what people do" sexually and to share that information as widely possible, while encouraging abandonment of traditional moral boundaries. His work was approved as an "extension ministry," accepted each year by a succession of California-Nevada bishops until he retired under Bishop **Melvin Talbert**. McIlvenna maintained an affiliation with Glide Church.

With financial support from the Glide's foundation and our denominational establishment, McIlvenna was a key (or perhaps

THE key) organizer of the 1964 San Francisco Consultation on the Church and the Homosexual (CRH), a landmark series of meetings that served as a pioneering, influential early movement toward acceptance of homosexual practice by liberal mainline Protestant clergy.

Over the course of his career, McIlvenna used pornography at educational events, raised money for prostitution-legalization activism, distributed pornographic pictures of himself with others, sold nude pictures of a female employee and her two elementary-school-age children to hardcore *Hustler* magazine (she later sued him for this), and publicly defended pedophilia.

He was also involved in producing his own pornography, including porn used for multi-media presentations called Sexual Attitude Readjustment or Sexual Attitude Restructuring (SAR). The highlight of this "total immersion workshop" was a non-stop barrage of pornographic images and sounds, creating a sensory overload intended to cause disorientation and desensitization to personal beliefs. (Contemporary neuroscience has found even limited pornography exposure creates *physical* brain changes.) A panel of "experts" could re-sensitize participants afterward to a more open-minded worldview on sexual morality. Among those reportedly subjected to SARs were United Methodist agency officials, chaplains, missionaries, and leaders of the California-Nevada Conference.

We may never know how many liberal United Methodist clergy McIlvenna influenced through such activities. While few advocates of liberalizing church sexuality standards have gone as far as McIlvenna, it is worth asking why he never faced church discipline or restraining influences from leaders in the liberal California-Nevada Conference, to which he was accountable. ✚

FOR REFLECTION: *Job 31:1; Ephesians 5:3; Matthew 5:28-29.*

ACTION: *To learn more about the history of how our denomination got to its present place, read Forgetting How to Blush: United Methodism's Compromise with the Sexual Revolution (from which much of this is taken) by the Rev. Karen Booth, a former UMAction Advisory Board member. Available for purchase from the Store section of www.seedbed.com.*



Photo credit: YouTube

GOOD NEWS: Fastest Growing Large UM Congregations continued from page 1

crusade of LGBTQ liberationist ideology. Claims that liberalizing the church's stances on issues of sexuality will produce growth are simply not backed up by evidence.

These trends are more pronounced with the congregations that have made it onto Len's List for at least three of the past four years. Of these 15 congregations, 12 are in the South, none are in the Western or Northeastern Jurisdictions (the two most

liberal of the UMC's five U.S. jurisdictions), at least 12 have evangelical senior pastors, and 12 are shepherded by Asbury alumni. ✚

ACTION: *To learn more about these missionally effective congregations and read advice from these pastors that may help your congregation, go to [www. https://juicyecumenism.com/topic/effective-united-methodist-churches/](http://www.https://juicyecumenism.com/topic/effective-united-methodist-churches/)*

GOOD NEWS: UMC Bishop Joins Catholic Bishop in Opposing Euthanasia

continued from page 3

has proposed a comprehensive rewriting of the social stances taken in the official UMC Social Principles. The most recently seen version of the GBCS's proposal would leave this quoted language in place while making a significant incremental shift by deleting statements that oppose "assisted suicide" and those that categorically declare that "suicide is not the way a human life should end."

This ecumenical declaration is encouraging in light of a broader cultural trend toward viewing euthanasia in a more favorable light. ✝

FOR REFLECTION: *Job 1:20-22, 2:9-10; Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 8:8; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17.*

ACTION: *Thank Bishop Scott Jones for his leadership: Texas Conference UMC / 5215 Main Street / Houston, TX 77002 / sjjones@txcumc.org*

Campus Minister Highlights Slippery Slope

continued from page 4

In teaching these values to United Methodist college students, Wolsey is supported by Dr. **Karen Oliveto**, who is currently illegitimately occupying the bishop's office for the Denver-based Mountain Sky Area of the UMC. We have recently seen several new caucus groups that claim to be theologically "centrist" or traditionalist on doctrinal matters other than homosexuality serving as the main promoters of the "One Church Plan" (see "Judicial Council Clarifies," p. 2). Yet leaders of these groups have consistently defended Oliveto continuing to occupy the bishop's office. Apparently, the value seen in her being openly homosexually partnered, in blatant violation of our denomination's rules, while occupying the bishop's office (for now) trumps any of the concerns about her enabling such false teachings. ✝

FOR REFLECTION: *2 Timothy 4:1-10.*



Author and pastor Roger Wolsey (photo: YouTube screen capture)

UMAction Briefing

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

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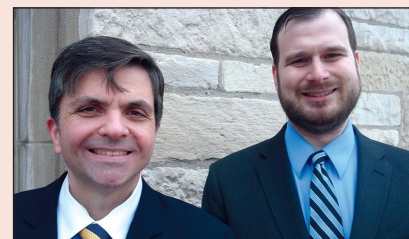
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