



GOOD NEWS: Fastest-Growing United Methodist Megachurches Dominated by Evangelical Pastors

Earlier in 2017, **Len Wilson** of St. Andrew United Methodist Church in Plano, Texas, researched United Methodist churches in the USA with at least 2,000 people in average weekly attendance (AWA) and compiled a list of the 25 with the fastest AWA growth in the last five years, and the top ten with the most growth in the last ten years. In both lists, most congregations had the same senior pastor for the bulk or all of the study period.

Both lists have some geographic and theological diversity. But it is worth noting that not one congregation in either list is located within the UMC's radicalized Western Jurisdiction or among those formally affiliated with the LGBTQ-affirming Reconciling Ministries Network.

American United Methodists are becoming increasingly concentrated in the South and increasingly sparse in the North and West.

Other general patterns are rather clear, especially in the list of churches with more sustained growth over a full decade.

Forty percent of the congregations on Wilson's five-year list and half of those on his ten-year list experienced their growth under a pastor who graduated from Asbury Theological Seminary, a bastion of faithful, evangelical Methodism. No other school comes close. Meanwhile, not one congregation on either list was led through such growth by any graduate of the UMC's most liberal official UMC seminaries, Claremont and Iliff.

Other liberal-leaning UMC seminaries do not have a single graduate on either list: Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, the Methodist Theological School in Ohio, St. Paul School of Theology, and Wesley Theological Seminary.

Theologically, the senior pastors for close to two-thirds of the congregations on the five-year-growth list and 90 percent of those on the ten-year-growth list are known as traditional evangelicals.

Geographically, 52 percent of the congregations in the five-year list and 40 percent of those in the ten-year list are in our Southeastern Jurisdiction, the most relatively conservative of our five U.S. jurisdictions. Another 32 percent in the five-year list and another 40 percent in the ten-year list are in the moderate South Central Jurisdiction. This corresponds to wider trends of our denomination's U.S. membership declining overall, but rather unevenly, so that American United Methodists are becoming increasingly concentrated in the South and increasingly sparse in the North and West.

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Pastor Rurel Ausley of Crosspoint UMC is an Asbury Theological Seminary graduate who leads one of the 100 largest congregations in the United Methodist Church. (Photo: Crosspoint UMC)

Commission Retains Size of General Conference

With major implications for the balance of power in our global denomination, the powerful Commission on the General Conference recently voted to keep the size of the 2020 General Conference roughly the same as last year's General Conference.

On the one hand, this decision keeps in place the move by this same commission four years earlier to dramatically shrink the size of the 2016 (and 2019) General Conference from the nearly 1,000 delegates at each of the previous several General Conferences to only 864. That reduction was made over the strong protests of *UMAction* and other renewal groups. We had objected, among other reasons, because smaller delegations would be less representative and less diverse.

But on the other hand, this recent decision was an overwhelming rejection of a liberal plot to shrink future General Conferences even further.

Any change to the total number of delegates inevitably skews voting power to benefit some regions at the expense of others. The more the total number of delegates is reduced, the more the balance of power shifts away from Africa (an increasingly important bulwark for biblically faithful United Methodism) and larger (and generally more conservative) U.S. annual conferences.

A controversial rule in our current system entitles every annual conference, no matter how few people it has, to send at least two delegates to General Conference. Nearly half of UMC annual conferences around the world—including over half of those in the U.S.'s radicalized Western Jurisdiction and all 45 in Europe and the Philippines—had so few people that they only sent the minimum of two delegates last time. So reducing the total *number* of delegates takes delegates away from larger regions in order to give



Delegates consider legislation during the 2016 United Methodist General Conference in Portland, Ore. (Photo: Mike DuBose/UMNS)

the smallest regions control over a greater *percentage* of General Conference votes. Larger conferences are given additional delegates in proportion to their clergy and lay membership.

The disparity is such that some annual conferences are represented by one delegate for every 200 church members (or even less), while others are represented by one delegate for about every 30,000 members. So proportionate to membership, United Methodists in some regions have many times more power than those elsewhere. The more the size of General Conference is shrunk in such power grabs by the smaller conferences, the worse this problem becomes.

Shrinking General Conference also perversely punishes some annual conferences for their evangelistic success (by taking away the added representation they would get for growing their churches) while elsewhere rewarding decline. In a 2016 United Methodist News Service report, retired Bishop **Daniel Arichea** admitted that the process of sub-dividing into more annual conferences than may be necessary has been “abused” for the sake of shifting more delegates to some smaller regions of the church.

As a result of membership shifts and the decision to maintain the decreased size of General Conference, in 2020 the United States as a whole will lose 22 delegates and Africa will gain 18. Despite this minimal increase in African delegates, the failure to go back to 1,000 delegates ensures the continued

severe under-representation of Africa as a whole and the proportional over-representation of tiny conferences elsewhere.

“Non-partisan” arguments for shrinking General Conferences do not hold water. Contrary to some rhetoric, UMC General Conferences are actually rather on the

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The Commission on General Conference held their fall meeting at Camp Sumatanga in Gallant, AL. (Photo: Diane Degan/United Methodist Communications)

UMAction Teaches UMC Congregations How to Advance Pro-Life Cause

Unborn children threatened with the deadly violence of abortion and pregnant women in desperate circumstances are among the most vulnerable bearers of God's image. Earlier in 2017, the Western Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church officially invited UMAction Director **John Lomperis** to offer training sessions for interested pastors and laity on how our congregations can advance pro-life values and ministry.



UMAction Director John Lomperis speaks to United Methodist leaders in Western Pennsylvania about how our congregations can advance the Pro-Life cause. (Photo: Pastor Nate Fugate)

These sessions reviewed the ways the UMC has been moving in an increasingly pro-life direc-

tion, including the 2016 General Conference's voting by strong majorities to end our denomination's formal affiliation with the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC)—a strident political lobby that has called all abortions “holy”—and repealing a denominational resolution endorsing the infamous 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decisions imposing abortion-on-demand in all fifty states. These votes were historic reversals of some four decades of official UMC support for abortion. But our denomination still has a long way to go if it is, in the words of Florida Bishop **Ken Carter**, to “abandon its present partisan political captivity and join the evangelical and catholic consensus in regard to life.”

The sessions also included discussion of practical ways congregations can pursue compassionate ministries to reduce abortions. Lomperis outlined “Nine Steps of How to be a Pro-Life Congregation” in teaching and programming, each of which is essential:

1. Start with the foundation of a **consistently pro-life ethic**, valuing ALL human life as preciously bearing God's image (promoting anti-racism, women's dignity, end-of-life compassion, etc.).
2. Teach biblical **Christian sexual values** to youth AND adults.
3. Teach **life-affirming values to married couples**, especially in pre-marital counseling (especially warning about

abortifacient birth control methods and fertility treatments that destroy human embryos).

4. Partner with and support your **local pro-life crisis pregnancy center** or pregnancy help center. Find such centers near you at www.care-net.org and www.optionline.org.
5. Actively promote and support **adoption**.
6. Support **single mothers**.
7. Offer **post-abortion** care and sensitivity.
8. **Intentionally and explicitly** lift up the pro-life cause in church teaching, worship, education, programming, and narthex literature—recognizing that even a brief mention during prayer time of general pastoral concern for women and men in need of forgiveness and healing for past sins of abortion can make a big impact.
9. Build a **culture of life beyond the congregation**, within our denomination and society (organize trips to the annual March for Life in Washington, send UMC resolutions to annual conference and General Conference, etc.).

These trainings were well received and led to further discussions among participants. ✚

FOR REFLECTION: Psalm 139:13-14; Matthew 25:31-46.

ACTION: To share ideas and mutual encouragement with other pro-life United Methodists pursuing such ministries, e-mail our friend Cindy Evans of Lifewatch, with “PRO-LIFE DISCUSSION” in the subject line: cindy@lifewatch.org

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small side compared to the equivalent assemblies of other major denominations, especially in proportion to our membership. And while shifting the number of delegates could shift costs by up to a million dollars, this is a tiny percentage of our denomination's quadrennial budget of over \$600 million. Plenty of meeting spaces around the world have room to accommodate 1,000 delegates.

When liberals have realized that the math of General Conference is unfavorable to their causes, some have been cynically trying to change the arithmetic. ✚

ACTION: Thank Commission Chair Samuel Duncan McMILLAN, IV for not further shrinking General Conference size, and urge that future General Conferences after 2020 increase back to 1,000 delegates, for greater representation, fairness, and trust: 3301 Kentyre Drive / Fayetteville NC 28371 / sdmcmillan0727@email.cambell.edu

Global Accountability Proposal Pits UMAction, Allies vs. Western Jurisdiction Leaders

United Methodist bishops have long complained that our denomination's governing *Book of Discipline* ties their hands from offering needed leadership in addressing major problems. But this could change soon, with the likely approval of a new amendment to the United Methodist Church's Constitution.

This historic proposal would allow the global UMC Council of Bishops to discipline individual bishops accused of wrongdoing. Our longstanding system has kept bishops accountable only within each of the twelve broad regions (jurisdictions in the United States and central conferences overseas) into which the UMC is divided. This amendment was drafted in response to a situation in which a bishop was accused of mismanaging funds, but there was no further recourse after his fellow bishops in his own region did not impose accountability.

However, this could have wider implications. Within the numerically tiny, ideologically radicalized U.S. Western Jurisdiction, bishops have long promoted a culture of "ecclesial anarchy," openly allowing disobedience to the *Discipline's* biblical standards on marriage that all bishops vow to uphold. Since every active Western Jurisdiction bishop has supported violating the *Discipline*, there has been no way to bring accountability there. After the 2016 Western Jurisdictional Conference elected openly partnered lesbian activist **Karen Oliveto** to be bishop, in open violation of our rules forbidding any "self-avowed practicing homosexual" clergy, the UMC Judicial Council (our denomination's supreme court) basically reviewed the matter and determined there is no basis in church law for Oliveto to continue as a bishop. However, responsibility for enforcement of this ruling has remained within the Western Jurisdiction, whose leaders have chosen keep her in office while claiming that they are still processing the complaint against her (very slowly).

Unsurprisingly, as annual conferences around the country met in 2017 to vote on this Global Accountability Amendment, strong opposition, including from regionally prominent leaders, was especially concentrated in the Western Jurisdiction. Some openly expressed concern that Oliveto could be affected if the relatively more balanced UMC Council of Bishops (composed of every bishop around the world) was empowered to manage complaints against individuals occupying the bishop's office, rather than keeping accountability limited to the regional level.

UMAction strongly campaigned in support of this proposal. Given the limited public opposition outside of the Western Jurisdiction and anecdotal reports of strong support in some overseas conferences, it seems likely that it will pass.

But it is far from certain. The 2017 annual conferences took closely watched votes on this and other proposed constitutional amendments on very important matters, ranging from sexism to marriage to democratic governance. But in a dramatic break



Karen Oliveto (center) flanked by supportive Western Jurisdiction bishops (Photo: United Methodist Church Pacific Northwest Conference)

from tradition, bishops (particularly in the USA) have chosen to conceal the voting results from their annual conferences rather than publicly releasing them immediately after the votes are taken. The supposed reason is that releasing the results from conferences that meet earlier in 2017 may unfairly influence those conferences who meet and vote later in the year. That is debatable, but not unreasonable. Yet there is no good reason, and many bad ones, for our bishops to continue hiding the results from their respective conferences after the last annual conference had its 2017 session in mid-December. ✚

ACTION: Write to your bishop and respectfully ask him or her to publicly release the results of your annual conference's votes on the five proposed constitutional amendments in 2017. Contact information can be found at your church office or www.umc.org/directory

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Wilson has been compiling such lists for several years, with the same broad overall patterns in terms of theology, seminaries, and geography. This points to the future of our denomination in the United States being increasingly located in more conservative regions, led by biblically faithful pastors, and shaped by Asbury alumni. ✚

FOR REFLECTION: *John 15:3–11.*

ACTION: To read UMAction's exclusive interviews with some of these highly effective pastors, and to learn ideas you may apply in your own congregation, visit www.juicyecumenism.com/topic/effective-united-methodist-churches/

GOOD NEWS: New Room Rallies Evangelical Methodists

On September 20–22, some 1,500 evangelical United Methodists and others in the Wesleyan theological family gathered in Tennessee for the fourth annual New Room Conference.

Sponsored by Seedbed, the publishing arm of Asbury Theological Seminary, this national yearly conference features heartfelt worship, inspiring speakers, and an abundance of workshops to equip attendees for Christian ministry and discipleship ranging from

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Participants at the 2017 national New Room conference (Photo: Heather Hahn/UMNS)

Illegitimate Lesbian Activist ‘Bishop’ Says Jesus Was a Bigot!

While illegitimately occupying the bishop’s office for the Denver-based Mountain Sky Area of the United Methodist Church, Dr. **Karen Oliveto** is using that office to teach people to have less reverence for Jesus Christ.

Since summer 2016, we have reported how the Western Jurisdiction elected openly partnered lesbian activist Karen Oliveto to be bishop (in open defiance of our denomination’s prohibitions on clergy being “self-avowed practicing homosexuals”), how *UMAction* helped persuade the UMC’s Judicial Council to remove any basis in church law for her to remain indefinitely in the bishop’s office, and the ongoing foot-dragging by Western Jurisdiction officials (see “Global Accountability Proposal,” page 4).

In the meantime, Dr. Oliveto has been abusing the office to promote radical agendas. In a recent public weekly message, she took aim at the core Christian doctrine of Jesus Christ’s sinlessness. She described Jesus as guilty of such sins as “bigotries and prejudices.” According to Oliveto, during a certain encounter in his adult ministry, Christ had a “conversion” when he realized that he “had made his life too small” and he learned things about “the heart of God and the care of God” he had not realized before a particular human teacher enlightened Him.

As Oliveto put it, “We might think of him as the Rock of Ages, but he was more like a hunk of clay, forming and reforming himself in relation to God.”

This is contrary to the full biblical picture we see of Jesus Christ as the perfect, sinless Second Person of the Trinity who understood and diligently pursued his mission, even when his followers did not.

As her proof text, Oliveto used the admittedly difficult passage of Matthew 15:21–28 (paralleled in Mark 7:24–30), in which Jesus initially balked at healing a Gentile woman’s daughter. But Oliveto ignored readily available orthodox commentary, including John Wesley’s note that, “He [God] sometimes tries our faith in like manner.”

Oliveto warned against those who “create an idol out of” Jesus Christ. By definition, if Jesus is truly divine, it is impossible to “create an idol out of” him. But it is not clear how Oliveto’s view of Jesus as a flawed but noteworthy teacher is really different from the way some Unitarians or atheists may view him. ✚



Disputed United Methodist Bishop Karen Oliveto. (Photo: Twitter)

FOR REFLECTION: *John 3:17–18, 6:26–40; Galatians 1:6–9; Colossians 1:15–20; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:14–15; 1 Peter 2:21–22.*

ACTION: *Pray that people will not be led astray by Karen Oliveto’s false teachings. Read our theological analysis of her criticisms of Jesus in a September 15 article in the United Methodist section of our website. Discuss with your pastor your concerns about having her remain in the bishop’s office.*

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church planting to how to pray. A recurrent central theme is praying and “sowing seeds” for revival.

The 2017 conference pushed re-introducing the “bands” of early Methodism. These were central to John Wesley’s theology of Christian holiness. Joining a band required a higher level of basic Christian commitment than early Methodist “class meetings.” Each band would gather half a dozen members of the same gender at weekly sessions to lovingly support each other through praying for each other, holding each other accountable for biblical Christian living, sharing about temptations faced, and confessing their sins to each other.

Two United Methodist ministers and scholars, **Scott Kisker** of United Theological Seminary and **Kevin Watson** of Candler School of Theology, co-authors of a new book, *The Band Meeting*, testified about how helpful being in such bands has been to their own Christian walks. While such transparency may seem intimidating, Kisker explained that the foundation was, “You are going to risk being known in order to risk knowing that you are loved.” Watson said, “The band meeting was the engine of holiness in early Methodism” and it could do this for us again.

This last New Room Conference also featured the launch of a new “Multiplication Network” to support those planting new congregations or “re-missioning” existing ones. Rev. Dr. **Timothy Tennent**, Asbury’s President, told the United Methodist News Service that this is not designed to start a new denomination but rather to offer training and networking “to help all the traditions in church planting.”

New Room conferences are great fellowship and networking opportunities for like-minded, traditional United Methodists from around the country, from bishops and renewal leaders to concerned people in the pews, with many young adults on fire for Jesus.

It also allows Bible-believing United Methodists to fellowship with evangelicals from other Methodist denominations. It is probably the largest annual American gathering of the wider pan-Methodist family.

David Watson, United Seminary’s Academic Dean, offered this summary: “New Room was a great conference. I highly recommend it. If you’re able to go, I don’t think you’ll be disappointed. To the contrary, I think you’ll find it refreshing, and you may receive a fresh touch from God.” ✝

FOR REFLECTION: *Romans 15:5-7; 1 Corinthians 1:2; James 5:16.*

ACTION: *To learn about the next New Room Conference, regional gatherings near you, relevant ministry resources, and New Room networks for new bands, church planters, and church re-missioners, visit the New Room website: www.newroom.co (note: there is no “m” at the end)*

UMAction Briefing

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

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