

Sermon Series: Praying Our Way Forward: LGBTQ Issue Facing the UMC

Sermon: The Three Options

Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Psalm 34:1-8; Mark 10:46-52

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This is not a sermon as much as a presentation on the three options before the Special Called General Conference in February 2019. First I will share a brief history of the UMC stance on homosexuality. Second, I will explain the three options that the General Conference will vote on in February. Third, I will update us on the Judicial Council ruling on the options. Fourth, since my role as your spiritual leader is to provide an interpretation of scripture, I will interpret today's biblical passages based on the current situation in the United Methodist Church.

First, the history. At the 1972 General Conference, language was inserted into the denomination's *Book of Discipline* for the first time stating, "We do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider it incompatible with Christian teaching." However, there was a statement added that homosexuals are people "of sacred worth." At later General Conferences language was added that prohibited clergy to marry people who are in same sex relationships and prohibited "self-avowing homosexuals" from being ordained. Every four years when General Conference met there was a tug-of-war among the traditionalists and the progressives on this issue. For nearly fifty years, the Church has discussed, debated, argued, fought, and voted. Each time the vote supported the language in *Book of Discipline*. And each time the LGBTQ members of the church cried out like blind Bartimaeus while other church members told them to be quiet.

At the 2016 General Conference, delegates asked the Council of Bishops to find a way forward. Einstein is to have said, "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used to create them." When the General Conference met every four years, we were not solving "the problem" but repeating the same thinking. The church is in need of a new way. The Council of Bishops organized a special commission called, "The Commission on A Way Forward," to study the issue and make recommendations to a special called 2019 General Conference. The bishops chose a diverse group of 32 people from 9 countries and 15 states. They were men and women, gays and straight, conservatives and progressives, laity and clergy. This group met six times in different locations in 2017. They were assigned the task "to maximize the United Methodist witness in the world that allows for as much contextual differentiation as possible, and that balances an approach to different theological understandings of human sexuality with a desire for as much unity as possible. This unity will not be grounded in our conceptions of human sexuality, but in our affirmation of the Triune God who calls us to be a grace-filled and holy people in the Wesleyan tradition." They gave their report to the bishops in the first half of 2018. Their report was not a product of debate or parliamentary procedure, but a product of conversation, study, prayer, listening, transparency and trust.

The Commission presented three options to the Bishops to be considered at the Special Called General Conference in February 2019. The three options are: The One Church Plan, the Connectional Conference Plan, and the Traditional Plan. We will look at what each plan offers. First, the One Church Plan. This is the plan that 85% of the bishops support. This plan recognizes the diverse theological and scriptural understandings of our global church, provides generous unity for conferences, churches, and pastors, removes the restrictive language from our current Book of Discipline, maintains the current structure of the denomination, does not require any annual conference, bishop, congregation, or pastor to act contrary to their convictions, and allows congregations and pastors greater freedom to reach new people.

The Connectional Conference Plan would create three values-based connectional conferences: Traditional (no one can), Unity (all can, no one must, some will, some won't), and Progressive (all shall), allows for a *Book of Discipline* within each connectional conference, and reduces General Boards and Agencies to a few shared services: Wespath (health and benefits), Publishing House, Finance and Administration, Commission on Archives and History, United Methodist Committee on Relief, parts of Global Ministries. The current central conferences (African) have the choice of becoming their own connectional conference or joining

a values-based connectional conference. Council of Bishops would be focused on shared learning and ecumenical relationships. Episcopal oversight, accountability, elections, assignments, and funding occur within the College of Bishops of each connectional conference. Jurisdictional Conferences choose their connectional conference. Annual Conferences can choose a different connectional conference than Jurisdictional Conference. Local churches can choose a different connectional conference from their annual conference.

The Traditional Plan would strengthen the current language of *The Book of Discipline* concerning human sexuality and increase accountability, ask annual conferences and bishops to certify they will support *The Book of Discipline*, streamline the process to enforce penalties for violations of *The Book of Discipline* related to marriage and ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexual persons, maintain the current structure of the church, continue all general agencies, and design a process for those who cannot live within the Discipline to change their relationship with the UMC.

The Council of Bishops asked the Judicial Council to review these three plans to see if they are constitutional so that in February delegates to General Conference wouldn't vote on a plan that would be ruled unconstitutional. Their eighty-seven page ruling came out on Friday. The One Church Plan was deemed constitutional with the exception of three sentences. In its ruling on the One Church Plan according to the United Methodist News Service, the Judicial Council pointed out that the principle of connectionalism in The United Methodist Church "permits contextualization and differentiation on account of geographic, social and cultural variations and makes room for diversity of beliefs and theological perspectives but does not require uniformity of moral-ethical standards regarding ordination, marriage and human sexuality." The Judicial Council pointed out that General Conference's legislative power includes the authority to "adopt a uniform, standardized or non-uniform differentiated theological statement." The constitution also assigns to General Conference "the legislative function to set standards related to certification, commissioning, ordination and marriage," along with the administrative responsibility to apply them to annual conferences, local churches and pastors. "The legislative branch of the Church is constitutionally free to set the standards for entrance into the ministry wherever and whenever it sees fit," the court said in its ruling. The court added that "the annual conference may enact additional requirements that are not in conflict with the letter or intent of the minimum standards set by the General Conference."

The Judicial Council ruled that seventeen parts of the Traditional Plan were unconstitutional. The Traditional Plan would impose mandatory penalties on those who do not adhere to church law that prohibits self-avowed practicing homosexuals from serving as clergy and clergy from officiating at same-sex weddings. "Clergy persons whose credentials and conference membership are at stake have the right to know what to expect when they choose a course of action or take a particular stance on ordination, marriage and human sexuality," the decision said. "To pass constitutional muster, any proposed legislation affecting clergy rights must define with sufficient clarity and specificity the standards to guide future actions of all concerned persons and entities." In addition, while General Conference can require that the Book of Discipline be upheld in its entirety and impose sanctions for non-compliance, it cannot selectively choose certain standards "for enhanced application and certification." "Marriage and sexuality are but two among numerous standards candidates must meet to be commissioned or ordained," the decision said. It noted that other criteria that should be part of a thorough examination include "being committed to social justice, racial and gender equity (and) personal and financial integrity." The Traditional Plan also requires certification for standards related only to self-avowed practicing homosexuals and such selective and partial application of church law violates the principle of legality and are unconstitutional, Judicial Council said. Parts of the plan "to ensure compliance," also were found unconstitutional.

The Connectional Plan is unconstitutional. Currently the denomination's constitution states that conferences can only be formed geographically. This was added when the denomination dissolved conferences based on race in the 1960s. For this plan to become constitutional, a constitution amendment would need to be drafted. Each current Annual Conference would have to vote on it and it would have to pass by a 2/3 majority. Then if 2/3 of the Annual Conferences passed the amendment, we would have a new constitutional amendment.

Last week I spoke about how our interpretation of scripture influences our views on homosexuality as a sin or our views on inclusivity. There is much anxiety in the church over our future. No matter what the General

Conference decides some folk will not be satisfied. Some will decide to go another way. As I turn to this morning's scriptures, I see God's hand in this process that the church is going through. First in Psalms, no matter what the circumstances, we are to always praise God. We are to seek the Lord at all times. Those who suffer do cry out. God listens, delivers, and saves. So no matter what your view is on this issue. God listens and will deliver us. Look at Job's story. What meaning could this allegory have for the church today? Could it tell us that no matter how bad it gets, God is still God? Could it tell us that God is greater than our divisions? And could it possibly tell us that all will be well as it became for Job? And next the passage from Mark. Like Bartimaesu, there are those who God loves and they crying out for the church to recognize them and have mercy on them. Since the Gospels are mute on the subject of homosexuality, what do you think Jesus would say to their plea, "Teacher, we want to be."?

Hear this sentence from The United Methodist Church's preamble to our constitution. "The prayers and intentions of The United Methodist Church... have been and are for obedience to the will of our Lord that his people be one, in humility for the present brokenness of the Church and in gratitude that opportunities for reunion have been given." Our differences don't have to divide us. Our differences show us the unique divinity of God. Please pray for our way forward in The United Methodist Church.

Resources: *Unafraid and Unashamed: Facing the Future of United Methodism* by Wil Cantrell;
www.bwcumc.org; www.umc.org; www.umnews.org; wesleyancovenant.org