

United Methodist Views on Homosexuality

Methodist Church, Hong Kong Seminar

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Sister and Brother Hong Kong Methodists, let me first express profound gratitude for your pioneering efforts in holding these seminars to discuss a wide diversity of views and beliefs regarding homosexuality. Let me also note at the outset that I do not personally believe people of a homosexual persuasion are the problem, rather our differing views **about** homosexuality is the major problem and a major stumbling block to church unity.

In previous sessions you've heard about and hopefully had wide-ranging discussions regarding Biblical understandings [note the plural!] about homosexuality. Meanwhile, please continue to remember and cherish our Wesleyan Quadrilateral, four very important dimensions: **scripture, tradition, reason and experience**. Wonderful, you say! Alas, far too often the problem is YOUR understandings of these four, may strongly differ from someone sitting next to you. Not surprisingly, this diversity or disagreement may vary within a local Methodist parish or even within your own household. Billy Graham's sermons regularly included the phrase "*The Bible says*". The problem with such a view is that different believers in different places, different eras and different ways, interpret what the Bible "says" in many different ways!

Sometimes when typing **U-n-i-t-e-d** Methodist, I mistakenly type **U-n-t-i-e-d** Methodists! Not since the mid-1800s when the American Methodist Episcopal Church split into two denominations [over issues of slavery] has The United Methodist Church [TUMC] seemed more "**untied**" than "**united**".

Thanks for noting – and remembering – **there is no 美國聯合衛理公會**. TUMC is a global church with Annual Conferences in nearly 40 nations. While Methodists may strongly advocate the importance of **scripture, tradition, reason and experience**, it is disagreement over these very principles that now threatens to structurally divide TUMC.

By church law and practice, "**Only the General Conference speaks for TUMC**". When alleged violations occur, there are church judicial steps available to hopefully rectify them. The 2016 General Conference reaffirmed the following:

1. "...All persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status [meaning sexuality] or economic condition shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs...and become professing members in any local church ..."
2. "...The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching"
3. Self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as clergy, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church...."
3. UMC clergy are forbidden to conduct same-sex weddings.

The above are TUMC's official statements; here are some of the problems/challenges/opportunities:

1. **Many U.S. bishops, Annual Conferences, clergy and laity are taking strong public stands against TUMC's OFFICIAL positions.** Opponents understandably say they are violating church law; supporters praise them for "*healing on the Sabbath*".
2. **In violation of TUMC law, several retired bishops and many retired and active clergy have conducted same-sex weddings.** TUMC prohibition regarding such marriages is now at odds with U.S. Federal laws which, since a 2015 U.S. Supreme Court decision [6-4], uphold same-sex civil unions.
3. **At least sixteen U.S. Annual Conferences have passed resolutions officially objecting** to General Conference legislation regarding Christian teachings on homosexuality [*What is the difference between "Christian teachings" and "Biblical understandings"?*]; prohibitions on ordination of 'practicing homosexuals'; and prohibition of UMC clergy conducting conduct same-sex weddings.
4. **Boards of Ordained Ministry and Bishops in many U.S. Annual Conferences** continue to accept, ordain and appoint [station] both practicing and non-practicing homosexual clergy.

5. **In July 2016 the U.S. Western Jurisdiction elected and consecrated a practicing lesbian as bishop.** In April 2017 the church's Judicial Council ruled by a 6-3 vote, the election and consecration violated church law. However, she remains "*In good standing*" and continues to serve as the Episcopal leader of five U.S. states.

6. **In recent years UMC numerical growth in Africa has outpaced that of other regions.** In most cases Africa's bishops and national laws remain strongly anti-homosexuality. Meanwhile, Africa's UMC numerical growth enables increased numbers of General Conference delegates and membership on General Boards and Agencies and a corresponding increase of influence in church politics and decision-making.

7. **Amid the growing threat of a split, the 2016 General Conference voted to create a Commission on a Way Forward** – an attempt to hopefully find **a** way for the church to become **MORE United** and **LESS Untied**. The Commission will present its final report to the Council of Bishops' [COB] May 2018 meeting. The COB will then decide what to present to a special called session of General Conference in early 2019. The agenda for that Special Session will be confined solely to issues arising from TUMC's diverse and divided views and practices relating to homosexuality. To date the Commission is considering three possible church structures:

- A. No changes. [Traditionalists]
- B. Remove **Book of Discipline** restrictions and allow individual Annual Conferences to decide. [Centrists]
- C. Create a multi-branch denomination with the five current U.S. Jurisdictions divided into three areas and U.S. Annual Conferences could choose which of the three they prefer to join. [Contextualists]

Finally, my sister and brother Methodists: I'm but one of 12.4 million United Methodists. My personal views, for what they're worth, are warmly welcomed by many and equally heatedly opposed by many.

However, I believe they stand the test of **scripture, tradition, reason and experience**: *God doesn't make mistakes!* If people are birthed as heterosexual – fine; as homosexual – fine! Whichever, be loyal, committed and faithful in whatever relationship you have with your chosen partner. Meanwhile, in keeping with TUMC's motto: "**Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors.** let the doors and ministries of the church be open to all who seek to be faithful followers of Christ.

Closing Prayer – based on liturgy in TUMC *Book of Worship*:

*Christ have mercy upon us,
and grant us wisdom.
make us one with you, Lord,
one with each other,
and one in ministry to all the world
until you come in final victory
and we feast together
at your heavenly banquet.
Amen.*