



A Way Forward and the United Methodist Churchⁱ

Within the United Methodist Church, there has been a decade's long debate on the church's official stance on the inclusion of LGBTQ persons within the denomination. On all sides of the discussion are Christians who love Jesus, who are passionate about making disciples of Jesus and who are connected in one church body. At the same time, they have significantly different convictions about how to interpret and apply scripture, reason, tradition, and experience to the inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the church. The debate has taken significant energy within the denomination. Some Pastors, Annual Conferences, and Jurisdictions within the denomination have made the decision to not follow the Discipline's prohibitions on marriage and ordination of pastors.

What happens when Christians in the same body disagree about an issue that elicits such strong reactions? What happens when the church is stuck in a cycle of debate and feels at a stalemate? What happens when the conflict between believers seems to become the main thing instead of the mission of making disciples? How do we find a way through the conflict while doing the least harm and prioritizing our mission of making disciples of Jesus?

This is why the General Conference voted in 2016 to try a new process covered in prayer and to trust the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The goal is to find a way forward that changes the dynamic in the denomination and allows us to focus on our mission of making more disciples of Jesus Christ. And at the same time, find a way that does this with the least harm to the mission of individual congregations and is most effective at promoting unity in Christ. A Special Commission titled "A Way Forward" was established by the Council of Bishops and the General Conference to do this work and bring back a report.

The Commission was "to do a complete examination and possible revision of every paragraph of the Book of Discipline concerning human sexuality and explore options that help to maintain and strengthen the unity of the church." The proposal was approved, and a 32-member commission was named in October of 2016. The commission was chosen to specifically represent the full spectrum of beliefs concerning human sexuality within the denomination.ⁱⁱ

That report was presented in May of this year and contained a selection of three different paths our Denomination might choose. A summary sheet of those choices is attached in chart comparison formats.ⁱⁱⁱ This will be the issue discussed in a Special Session of General Conference in February of 2019. The Council of Bishops has endorsed the "One Church" plan. The final decision will be in the hands of the Conference in February.^{iv}

Special note:

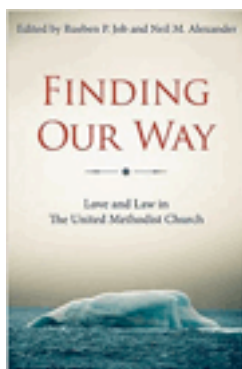
Rev Dr. Tom Berlin, a UMC pastor in Virginia has made this helpful video that helps us think about the issue. <http://revtomberlin.com/talking-about-lgbtq-inclusion-in-the-umc/#sthash.kdyUMGiy.dpbs>

Preparing for the Conversations and Decisions

In order to prepare for the conversations and decisions our church may need to make, the Leadership Council approved a plan to begin with study and conversation around several book offerings. As part of GROW offerings in the Winter quarter, we will offer a study of the book, "Crucial Conversations – Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High." It is a well-received book that gives guidelines and hope for anybody involved in difficult conversations – from interpersonal to family to community and national issues. You will be invited to become part of a group.



As Part of GROW offerings in the Spring quarter, you will be invited to join a book study group for one or more of the following books: "Finding our Way", "Bible, Gender, Sexuality", Embracing the Wideness", or "Torn."



These studies will be preparation for church-wide roundtable conversations that you will be encouraged to be part of in the summer and fall of 2019.

If you have any questions at all, contact our pastors.

ⁱ We are grateful to the leaders of the Montoursville United Methodist Church and their document on the subject from which we have used portions for this document.

ⁱⁱ You can learn more about the commission here: <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/commission-on-a-way-forward>

ⁱⁱⁱ You can learn more about the Commission's work from <http://greaternw.org/greater-northwest-area-invited-to-table-talks-to-discuss-a-way-forward-for-the-umc/>

^{iv} The General Conference has received other plans from other parts of the church. The Judicial Council will be considering the constitutionality of all the plans in October of this year, and only those that meet those guidelines will be presented to the General Conference alongside the report from the Commission.