

What is happening in the United Methodist Church?

Grace Family,

Our Methodist denomination has always wrestled with the cultural debates of its time. First, it was the American war for independence, then it was slavery. In each debate, Methodists on both sides were justifying their view with scripture. The Wesleyan Church and the Free Methodist Church exist as separate denominations from ours today because we failed to stay united together by our agreement on Jesus Christ despite our disagreements over slavery. The cultural debates of today threaten to split the Methodist Church again.

Methodists always wrestle over the cultural issues of the time because we believe that every Christian is called to study God's Word and seek God's Truth for themselves. When we do this, we won't all come to the same conclusions. But we trust God's Holy Spirit to guide us as we stay united by our commitment to Jesus Christ.

As United Methodists today, we are wrestling with our views on homosexuality. In this packet, I would like to give you a brief synopsis of what is happening in our denomination and what we can expect in the future. In the newsletter over the next month, I will share the key scriptures in this discussion with you, and how various groups of people who are seeking God's truth in Scripture are coming to different conclusions.

Parents, please use your own discretion when deciding how much of these packets to share with your teenagers or children. Due to the nature of the topic and the Egyptian, Greek, and Roman culture, some of the scriptures and interpretations are somewhat graphic.

I will not give you easy answers because there are no easy answers. We are called to faithfully follow Jesus as we seek God's wisdom in this messy world.

Pastor Chris

What happened at the last General Conference?

General Conference is the international legislative body of the United Methodist Church. Each region sends representatives to this conference every four years to vote on our policies and procedures as United Methodists.

For many decades, the United Methodist Church has been divided over the issue of same-sex marriage. Some believe that scripture clearly states that all homosexual behavior is sinful. Others believe that the homosexual behavior condemned in the Scriptures is very different than a marriage between two adults joined in a life-long monogamous commitment. With a few exceptions on both sides, those involved in this disagreement value the Bible as God's Word and are seeking to follow God faithfully.

Our current policy in the United Methodist denomination is as follows:

- We love and respect people who are gay or lesbian as persons of sacred worth. (UM Social Principles ¶161F)
- Homosexual behavior is not compatible with Christian teaching. (UM Book of Discipline ¶304.3)
- We do not allow churches to host or clergy to officiate same-sex weddings. (BoD ¶341.6)
- We allow people who identify as homosexual to serve as pastors so long as they remain celibate. (BoD ¶304.3)

This is our policy, however, many people have broken this policy. Churches and pastors have treated people who are gay as worthless. Churches have hosted and clergy have officiated the marriages of same-sex couples. Some Annual Conferences and Bishops have approved the ordination of pastors who are in a same-sex marriage. At the last General Conference in 2016, some groups were talking about leaving the United Methodists Church either through General Conference legislation or attempting a lawsuit. The majority of United Methodist delegates asked the Bishops to appoint a commission to find a 'Way Forward' and end the fighting. This commission includes many of the most prominent and outspoken voices from pastors and laity on all sides of the debate about homosexuality. They are called 'The Commission on a Way Forward'.

What is happening in February 2019?

The 'Commission on a Way Forward' has proposed 3 options, outlined below. The Council of Bishops believes that the One Church Plan is the best plan for the denomination. A Special General Conference has been scheduled for February 23-26, 2019 in St. Louis, MO to make a decision on how we will move forward as a denomination. The delegates representing Iowa were elected at our 2015 session of the Iowa Annual Conference.

	<u>Our Current United Methodist Policy</u>	<u>The One Church Plan</u>	<u>The Connectional Conference Plan</u>	<u>The Traditionalist Plan</u>
Summary of the Plan	<p>This is our current United Methodist Policy.</p> <p>If the 2019 Special General Conference does nothing, this will continue to be our procedure.</p>	<p>This plan allows each congregation, pastor, annual conference, and bishop to do what they believe is faithful to their interpretation of scripture.</p> <p>This plan requires a simple majority vote of General Conference delegates.</p>	<p>This plan restructures the denomination so that churches, pastors, annual conferences, and bishops are separated from those who disagree with them. We would have a 'Conservative Jurisdiction', a 'Progressive Jurisdiction', and a 'Contextual Jurisdiction'.</p> <p>Due to the structural changes in this plan, it would require both a simple majority vote of General Conference delegates and two-thirds of the Annual Conference delegates around the world to approve many constitutional amendments.</p>	<p>This plan implements strict penalties for pastors, churches, bishops, and annual conferences that do not adhere to the prohibitions against same-sex marriage. It also prohibits celibate people with homosexual attractions from serving as pastors.</p> <p>This plan requires a simple majority vote of General Conference delegates.</p>
Can people who are gay become members of a local church?	Yes, but some pastors try to prevent them from joining.	Yes	Yes	Yes
Can churches host same-sex wedding ceremonies	No, but some churches host them anyway with inconsistent consequences.	The default is no, unless the church votes to allow it.	It depends on which jurisdiction you join.	No. This plan does not appear to add new consequences for doing so.
Can pastors officiate same-sex marriages?	No, but some pastors officiate them anyway with inconsistent consequences.	Yes, but they cannot be required to.	It depends on which jurisdiction you join.	No. You will no longer be allowed to pastor a church if you do.

(Continued)	<u>Our Current United Methodist Policy</u>	<u>The One Church Plan</u>	<u>The Connectional Conference Plan</u>	<u>The Traditionalist Plan</u>
What if a pastor and a church disagree on same-sex marriage?	The church or pastor can request a new appointment.	The church can request a change in pastor and the bishop must honor it.	Pastors and churches select jurisdictions that reflect their beliefs.	Pastors and churches that allow same-sex weddings are removed from the denomination.
Can bishops and annual conferences approve the ordination of practicing homosexual pastors?	No, but some do any way with no consequences.	The default is no, unless the annual conference votes to approve. They may only vote every 30 months.	It depends on which jurisdiction you join.	No. You will be removed from the denomination as a bishop or annual conference if you do.
Can bishops and annual conferences approve the ordination of celibate homosexual pastors?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No. You will be removed from the denomination as a bishop or annual conference if you do.
Will churches be forced to accept a homosexual pastor?	Very rarely. Bishops typically try to appoint pastors who are a good fit for the congregation.	No. Churches may refuse a homosexual pastor and the Bishop is required to send an alternate.	No. Churches can choose to join a jurisdiction that gives them the right to refuse a homosexual pastor.	Very Rarely. A church may be appointed a celibate homosexual pastor who was ordained before 2019. Practicing homosexual pastors will lose their credentials. Candidates for ordination will be asked if they have homosexual attractions. If they answer, “Yes”, they will not be eligible to serve as pastor regardless of whether they act on these attractions.

Are these the only plans available?

No. Twenty individuals have proposed alternatives. You can read them at <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/gc2019-advance-edition-daily-christian-advocate>.

Even the plans above will need to be modified before they can be adopted. The Council of Bishops asked the United Methodist Judicial Council to review the three plans proposed by the Commission on a Way Forward to make sure they do not violate our United Methodist Constitution. They found two sentences in the One Church Plan and nearly half of the petitions in the Traditionalist plan to be unconstitutional. Teams of United Methodists are working on these two plans to bring them into alignment with our constitution before February. Because the Connectional Conference Plan involves constitutional amendments, the Judicial Council did not have jurisdiction to rule on it.

What do we need to do?

Pray, study the Scriptures, and listen to one another as you study.

United Methodists around the world are setting alarm clocks to **pray for the future of our denomination each day from 2:23-2:26 (AM or PM)** as we approach the Special General Conference that will take place from 2.23.2019 through 2.26.2019. If that time works for you, I encourage you to do the same. If it doesn't, I invite you to find another time to pray for the United Methodist Church as a whole and for Grace UMC in particular.

In the church newsletter over the next month, I will share more information with you, including the central scriptures in this discussion about same-sex marriage and the various ways that Jesus-following, Bible-believing Christians interpret them. Sign-up for our church newsletter by sending an e-mail to karen@marcusgrace.com.

Sunday, Dec. 2 from 3-5 p.m., I will host a conversation on this topic. This conversation will not be designed as a debate. There will be no winners or losers at the end of it. But it is a chance for Christians of different perspectives to hear one another and be heard. There is no need to RSVP. Simply come to the church at 3:00 p.m.

I also invite you to join me in a **3 week discussion, starting in January**. I am exploring options on Sunday afternoons, Tuesdays during the day, and Tuesday or Thursday evenings. If you have a preference between these four times, please me know (pastorchristian@marcusgrace.com).

It is unlikely that anything will change for our congregation in the foreseeable future.

The denomination will not vote until February. If they choose the One Church plan, churches will only need to vote if they want to allow same-sex weddings in their church, if they have irreconcilable differences with their pastor on the issue of same-sex marriage, or to refuse a homosexual pastor. Under the Connectional Conference plan, it will be several years before we would need to vote on which jurisdiction we would join. The Traditionalist plan does not allow local churches to vote. Under this plan, churches must accept the will of the General Conference or leave the denomination.

Final Thoughts

Some will say that it is critical for each person to know where they stand.

They will ask, "Where do you stand on this issue? Where do we stand as a church?"

There may come a day that we need to make that decision as a church.

Today however, the real question is not "where do you stand?", but "who can you stand?"

Can you stand to be in a denomination with people who interpret these verses differently than you do?

Can you stand to be in a congregation with people who interpret these verses differently than you do?

The 'One Church Plan' creates a church where people who disagree can respectfully stay together in the same denomination. United Methodists who love God and follow Jesus and can stand to be with those who hold different beliefs and practices concerning same-sex marriage can find support in the "**Uniting Methodists**" organization.

<https://unitingmethodists.com/>

Some United Methodists feel they cannot continue to be in a denomination with other churches and pastors who have varying beliefs and practices concerning same-sex marriage. They have formed "United Methodists for a Graceful Exit" (<https://um-gracious-exit.com/>), which advocates for clarifying and simplifying the means by which a local church may gracefully leave the denomination. Other groups who can't stand to be in a denomination with those who have differing beliefs and practices on this topic appear to be supporting this proposal. These organizations likely include The Wesleyan Covenant Association (<https://wesleyan covenant.org/>), Love Prevails (<https://loveprevails sumc.com/>), Good News (<https://goodnewsmag.org/>), and The Reconciling Ministries Network (<https://rmnetwork.org/>). If a 'Graceful Exit' is not created, some of these organizations may assist the churches that align with them to take legal action to leave the denomination.