

A Report from the UMC Next Event

As you know, this week Resurrection hosted more than 600 church leaders (participation was limited to 600 people to allow for round table discussions – over 2,600 applied to attend) for a three-day conversation called UMC Next about the future of the United Methodist Church in the aftermath of February's General Conference. Participants included ten leaders from every annual conference in the U.S., both laity and clergy among which were many of the pastors of our leading congregations as well as 12 bishops representing the Council of Bishops, 8 seminary presidents or deans, and most of the general secretaries of our boards and agencies. It was remarkable watching and listening to the meaningful conversations taking place around tables in our Foundry Hall this week. It was challenging, moving and, in the end, hope-filled.

The group focused on where the UMC goes from here, given our current divisions. Some conservative caucuses in the church would like the UMC to dissolve in order to form two or three new Wesleyan denominations loosely held together by a few common entities (the Board of Pensions among them). We discussed this, and many support it, but there is a concern for the unintended consequences for many churches who would be forced to decide which of the new expression they would join even as their own congregations are deeply divided, as well as the consequences for many of our United Methodist ministries and institutions. Others would prefer to remain in the church and simply resist what they consider unjust laws recently passed at General Conference. They are willing to allow conservative groups to leave in an amicable separation as they have requested for years, but don't wish to dissolve the UMC. Both of these paths will continue to be explored.

The following statement captured points of agreement and commitments that emerged during the UMC Next event:

1. We long to be passionate followers of Jesus Christ, committed to a Wesleyan vision of Christianity, anchored in scripture and informed by tradition, experience and reason as we live a life of personal piety and social holiness.

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2. We commit to resist evil, injustice and oppression in all forms and toward all people and build a church which affirms the full participation of all ages, nations, races, classes, cultures, gender identities, sexual orientations, and abilities.
3. We reject the Traditional Plan approved at General Conference 2019 as inconsistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ and will resist its implementation.
4. We will work to eliminate discriminatory language and the restrictions and penalties in the Discipline regarding LGBTQ persons. We affirm the sacred worth of LGBTQ persons, celebrate their gifts, and commit to being in ministry together.

This work will continue, along with conversations among the various parties in the UMC leading up to May of 2020 when General Conference will meet again.

I've had several of you ask, "Why does this matter so much to you?" Or, as one person asked, "Why have you become such a champion for same-sex marriage?" I see myself as a champion for people that I love and care about in our congregation who have a history of being hurt by the church, and who were hurt once more by the recent General Conference. I also believe that LGBTQ persons are not only people of sacred worth as our Book of Discipline says, but that they should be able to marry and have their marriages recognized in and by the church.

I also feel strongly that we must read scripture in the light of its historical context, through the lens of Jesus and the character of God he reveals. We read it with the help of the Holy Spirit, and informed by tradition, experience and reason. Scholars recognize that the biblical authors themselves questioned or challenged what previous biblical authors had written. Job counters the theology of the Chronicler. Malachi challenges Ezra's teaching on divorce. Jesus challenged Moses, and many of the prevailing understandings of scripture in his time. The apostles questioned whether God's clear command to Abraham concerning circumcision and the many laws given to Moses were applicable in the church.

There are many things in scripture that we question today as unjust, inappropriate or not applicable as written. Deuteronomy required that a man who rapes a woman pay her father 50 shekels and that he must marry and never divorce her (Deut 22:28-29) – in

that historical context this law was about providing for a woman who was wronged, but points to just how much historical context shapes scripture and to a law we would find completely inappropriate today. Paul tells people who divorce that they may not re-marry unless they remarry the spouse they divorced (1 Cor. 7). The Bible forbids tattoos and eating shellfish and pork, yet today many Christians have tattoos and eat pork and shellfish – something made possible by Paul’s theological reflection on the Law. Parents were to discipline their children with rods, but today we believe that beating your children may be harmful to them. Paul forbids women from teaching men or speaking in the church and Paul grounds his teaching about the subordination of women on the Genesis creation story (1 Timothy 2:11-15). Thankfully we’ve recognized the cultural context of Paul’s teaching about women’s leadership and we allow women to teach and preach today (though many conservative Protestant denominations, as well as Catholics and Orthodox Christians, continue to prohibit women as priests or pastors). For 1,500 years most Christians took the Genesis creation stories literally and read them in such a way that Galileo’s view that the earth revolved around the sun was deemed heresy and his books banned. I could go on with dozens of additional examples.

There are differing interpretive (hermeneutical) principles in how we interpret these passages, my point is that there has always been room to dialogue with, interpret and debate why scripture teaches what it does and how we interpret and apply it today. Today Christians debate the context and meaning of the handful of passages that forbid some form of same-sex acts, and whether these apply to gay and lesbian people today.

I mention all of this to say that it is this debate that United Methodist Christians are having today. It is a debate about scriptural interpretation – I believe traditionalists in the UMC do love and care for LGBTQ persons and wish to welcome them – I know that is true of those at Resurrection who hold more traditional understandings of marriage. What we are debating is how we read these texts. This is why I’ve sought to have a UMC where we both allow those with convictions that lead them to support same-sex marriage to minister according to these convictions, while allowing for those who are traditionalists to maintain their convictions – the key is that we hold our convictions and practice them with love.

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Regarding the future of the UMC, I suspect that by May of 2020 one of three things will have happened:

1. Come January when the new provisions of the Discipline go into effect there will be many churches across the country who will express in various ways their disagreement with these new rules.
2. Provision will be made for an amicable separation blessing those conservative churches and pastors who wish to leave to form a new association to have done so.
3. Some plan will emerge with the help of the bishops of the UMC that will allow annual conferences to decide their conferences' policies regarding marriage and ordination, and these annual conferences will align into new jurisdictions which ultimately may come together to form new denominations or quasi-denominations. This last step will take several years and will happen more or less organically with the final structure emerging over time.

Okay, that may be way more than you wanted to know. Here's what specifically matters for you: Your volunteers and staff hosted a meeting this week that was a very important step in discerning what is next. And while we have lost a few people in the last few months who were unhappy that we were talking about this, or that I clearly stated my support for LGBTQ persons to marry, we've also gained hundreds more since General Conference – people who have indicated that they want to be a part of a church that doesn't treat their LGBTQ friends as second class.

I know I've been talking about this a lot since General Conference. My intention is not for this to be our primary focus as a church; our focus is on following Jesus, growing as his disciples and being the Christians and church he calls us to be. But following GC it was important that we talk about these things, in part because of our church's role of leadership in the denomination. But this is my last lengthy report for some time – I just thought you'd appreciate a summary of what happened this last week.