

History of Proposed Changes in The United Methodist Book of Discipline

Compiled by the Collierville United Methodist, Discernment Team

Preface:

This document and the contents included were compiled by members of the Collierville United Methodist Church Discernment Team in an effort to consolidate the current controversies and issues at hand specifically around human sexuality, and how the UMC has handled it to date. It is intended to summarize a long history of events and is not intended to be a full description or representation of everything in whole. The goal of the information below, and additional information on our webpage, is to help inform and guide our congregation as we learn and education ourselves through this discernment process.

Current controversies in the United Methodist Church related to parts of the 2016 Book of Discipline (BOD) have caused issues on how to move forward with differing opinions related to the current discussions related to human sexuality. A provision, ¶2553, was added in the Book of Discipline in 2019 that allows a way for congregations to exit the UMC. From ¶2553: “Because of the current deep conflict within The United Methodist Church around issues of human sexuality, a local church shall have a limited right, under the provisions of this paragraph, to disaffiliate from the denomination for reasons of conscience regarding a change in the requirements and provisions of the Book of Discipline related to the practice of homosexuality or the ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals as resolved and adopted by the 2019 General Conference.”

This ¶2553 was proposed at the 2019 General Conference to allow churches to disaffiliate if the BOD language did change at the very same General Conference to become more open and accepting around issues of human sexuality. The Traditional Plan passed, thus the language did not change. Yet many conferences are allowing churches in both theological camps to use this provision to disaffiliate.

Therefore, the CUMC Discernment Team is committed to surveying the members of CUMC in a timely fashion in order to determine how the congregation believes regarding these theological topics.

Part 1:

A summary of the current (2016) United Methodist Book of Discipline rules related to membership, pastors and weddings as related to the issues of human sexuality:

- A. Everyone is welcome to be a member of the United Methodist Church.

¶4. Article IV. Inclusiveness of the Church

The United Methodist Church is a part of the church universal, which is one Body in Christ. The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth. All persons without regard to race, gender, color, national origin, status,⁴ or economic condition, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, upon baptism be admitted as baptized members, and upon taking vows declaring the Christian faith, become professing members in any local church in the connection.⁵ In The United Methodist Church no conference or other organizational unit of the Church shall be structured so as to exclude any member or any constituent body of the Church because of race, color, national origin, status or economic condition.⁶

4. Amended 1992.

5. Amended 2000.

6. See Judicial Council Decisions 242, 246, 340, 351, 362, 377, 398, 594, 601, and Decisions 4 and 5, Interim Judicial Council.

- B. Currently, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are “not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve” as pastors in the church. ¶304.3

¶304.3 Qualifications for Ordination

While persons set apart by the Church for ordained ministry are subject to all the frailties of the human condition and the pressures of society, they are required to maintain the highest standards of holy living in the world. The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore, self-avowed practicing homosexuals¹ are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.²

1. "Self-avowed practicing homosexual" is understood to mean that a person openly acknowledges to a bishop, district superintendent, district committee of ordained ministry, Board of Ordained Ministry, or clergy session that the person is a practicing homosexual; or is or is a person who publicly states she or he is a practicing homosexual. See Judicial Council Decisions 702, 708, 722, 725, 764, 844, 984, 1020

2. See Judicial Council Decisions 984, 985, 1027, 1028

- C. Currently, marriage is only supported between a man and a woman in the Book of Discipline and clergy are not allowed to perform same sex marriages.

¶161.C. The Nurturing Community

C) *Marriage*—We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman. We believe that God’s blessing rests upon such marriage, whether or not there are children of the union. We reject social norms that assume different standards for women than for men in marriage. We support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.

Part 2:

Key moments and actions that have led up to this point are described below.

1. There are issues related to clergy and conference leadership not following the Book of Discipline: The appointment of “self-avowed practicing homosexual” pastors and the officiating of same sex weddings have been common in several conferences without repercussions for the breaking of the rules in the Book of Discipline. A majority of the language in the Book of Discipline was added in 1972 (4 years after the original founding of the United Methodist Church). There are bishops and some cabinets that have indicated their commitment “to hold in abeyance all ... administrative and judicial complaint processes addressing restrictions in the Book of Discipline regarding gay and lesbian clergy and/or same-sex weddings until after General Conference meets and action related to the separation of the denomination can be considered.” <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-is-the-umc-really-part-2>
2. The issue at hand is only related to the appointment of clergy who are self-avowed practicing homosexuals and the ability of UMC clergy to perform same sex marriages.
3. At the 2016 General Conference:
 - Delegates supported a plan from the Council of Bishops that deferred action on all existing petitions regarding human sexuality and created a special commission to examine the issues and form a recommendation on how to move forward. The Council of Bishops may convene

- a special General Conference session and thus did, prior to GC 2020 to review the commission's recommendations.
- The current language of the 2016 Book of Discipline remains the same and the Bishops reminded and invited delegates to uphold the discipline.
 - The Bishops invited delegates to seek God's will for the future and to strengthen the unity of the church.
4. The Commission on a Way Forward was created by the Executive Committee of the Council of Bishops shortly after the 2016 General Conference. 32 members were selected to serve on the Commission, focusing on a diverse body that represents our global church. In the Commission there are persons from nine countries with a variety of theological perspectives. The Commission is one third laity, one third clergy, and one third bishops and includes younger persons, gay persons, professors, administrators, pastors, youth ministers, campus ministers, lay leaders, large church pastors, and persons identified with renewal and advocacy groups.
- "The Commission met nine times over seventeen months" in United Methodist facilities. They studied the Bible together. They consulted with United Methodist boards, agencies, institutions, and advocacy groups. They researched how other denominations have worked through similar conversations. <https://www.umc.org/en/content/the-commission-on-a-way-forward-report-what-you-should-know>
 - The Commission's mission is to help us find a way forward, with a vision toward maximizing The United Methodist Church's presence in the world, while allowing for "contextual differentiation." This includes balancing a desire to allow for "different theological understandings" with "as much unity as possible." <https://www.umc.org/en/content/the-commission-on-a-way-forward-report-what-you-should-know>
 - The Commission on a Way Forward finalized its plan in May 2018. It had three plans proposed in the report.
 - A. The One Church Plan
 - B. The Connectional Conference Plan
 - C. The Traditionalist Plan
5. At the 2019 Conference (Feb. 23-26, 2019)
- The Traditional Plan was voted on (and passed 53.28%)
 - A disaffiliation plan was passed: ¶ 2553 Disaffiliation of Local Churches Over Issues Related to Human Sexuality. Deadline was set for 12-31-2023 with no anticipation of delayed General Conferences.
6. In July 2019 an ad hoc group began to meet to "share ideas about the future of The United Methodist Church and how we might navigate the persistent conflict experienced by the denomination." This group consisted of traditionalists, centrists, and progressives; lay, clergy, and bishops. By February of 2020, they had created what came to be known as "The Protocol." They proposed a new paragraph to the Book of Discipline: ¶ 2556 –Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation and Restructuring. It was thought that this Protocol would overwhelmingly pass at the 2020 General Conference in August as it was unanimously supported by all represented groups. Unfortunately, due to the continued postponement of General Conference, "The Protocol" has yet to be brought before the body for possible adoption. <https://www.gracethroughseparation.com/legislation>

- “A local church that affiliates with a Methodist denomination pursuant to the Protocol other than the post-separation United Methodist Church retains its assets and liabilities. The Annual Conference to which the local church belongs at the time of its separation will not exercise its trust clause and shall release such a local church from the provisions of any and all trust clauses. Such a local church, prior to its separation, shall be expected to maintain its connectional responsibilities through the date of separation.”
<https://www.gracethroughseparation.com/faqs>
7. March 2020 – COVID-19 Pandemic experienced worldwide. 2020 General Conference in August 2020 was postponed to 2021.
 8. COVID variants continued to make large group gatherings and worldwide travel difficult, thus postponing General Conference again until August 2022.
 9. Then on March 3, 2022, it was further announced that General Conference would not take place until 2024, citing “COVID – related and governmental policies/constraints,” (i.e. lack of vaccinations world wide as of yet and back logs of VISAS for delegates to travel from around the world to the USA). <https://www.umc.org/en/content/general-conference-further-postponed-to-2024>
 - This announcement led some churches to move forward with a discernment process to allow for time to complete the disaffiliation process (§12553), if they decided to go in that direction.
 - At Collierville UMC a Discernment Team began to be formed in late March with a goal “To help our congregation understand better ‘Who We Are’ and what we think as a whole and in parts around theology and governance of The United Methodist Church.” <https://www.colliervilleumc.org/thediscoveryjourney/>
 10. June 2022 – 5 of the 16 member mediation team that created “The Protocol” released a statement withdrawing their support of the plan. <https://www.umc.org/en/content/reconciliation-protocol-loses-support-gaf>