

In Defense of Mexit:

Disagreement and Disunity in United Methodism

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The first item of business in tackling the issues around disagreement and disunity in United Methodism is to speak truthfully about our current crisis. The crisis is not one of how we can maintain organic unity in the midst of disagreement. The crisis is the breakdown of the bonds of unity; the relevant question facing the church is what to do about this. To treat the problem as one of how to maintain unity across our disagreements is to mask the deeper reality that has to be faced. Certain units and provinces of the kingdom of United Methodism have decided to walk alone rather than together. Now the General Conference must sort out what to do in response.¹

It is both common and natural to reject this alternative analysis and to frame the issue as simply the problem of securing unity in the midst of disagreement. It is not difficult to see the attraction of this way of thinking. If we are driven to explicit division, then we all know that the consequences will be radical and long-lasting. Think for a moment of what it might mean for our seminaries, colleges, and universities. A whole raft of legal and ecclesial changes would ensue that would be abruptly out of control. Or think of the impact on a host of local churches. Many would be torn apart at the seams if decisions have to be made on what group to join. Each of us can add our own catalogue of woe. However, catalogues of woe are a poor substitute for clear and incisive thinking about our situation. Thus I want to begin with a number of platitudes before making clear my own judgments on the breakdown of unity already in place and how we should respond to it.

First, the issue of human sexuality has become the most pressing issue for the church of our generation. This is not to say that it can be divorced from other crucial issues, say, of mission, ecclesial identity, ministerial orders, executive authority, epistemology, and the like. Nor is it to say that everyone would agree that it is the most important issue facing the church. We can all provide our own list of items on this score; for me, it would not be at or even near the top of my concerns. However, the crowbar of civil and church history in the West has sidelined ecclesial debates about ancillary matters. Human sexuality has become the issue of our time and anyone who cares about the future of the church cannot ignore it.²

Second, the disagreements in and around human sexuality are not simply secular issues driven by secular elites. The debate cannot be framed in terms merely of accommodation or reaction against the current secular culture. In fact, the famous *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision of the Supreme Court of the United States was written by a Roman Catholic. The warrant for the change in the understanding of marriage is cast in terms of the equal protection under the law guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment, but below the surface its logic can readily be traced to themes that are clearly Christian in content if not in origin. Interpreted in terms of an intellectual change, it signals a victory for progressive Christians in the recent phase of political and civic culture in the United States. Given that United Methodism has long had a close engagement with its cultural context, it would be astonishing if the divisions originally present in the host culture in North America but now resolved by legal fiat did not show up within its borders.

Third, we have now reached the point in our ecclesial deliberations where it is implausible to think that any new arguments and information are going to make any significant difference to where the various protagonists stand on the contested issues before us. The discussion has gone on for over forty years. Folk who care about the issues have done the best they can to wrestle with all the relevant evidence, however this is conceived. They have prayed, talked with friends, consulted material on the status and meaning of scripture, listened to the experience of Christians who are gay, read relevant empirical studies, and heeded the need for intellectual humility and the admonition to recognize their own fallibility. Simply, no new considerations are going to make a radical difference to what we already know. In part, the General Conference recognized this when it set the terms of reference for the new study commission. Its job is to tackle the problem of sustaining unity in the midst of substantial disagreement. Its job is not to initiate another round of moral and theological reflection.

Fourth, it is patently clear that United Methodist polity has a clear set of mechanisms for dealing with its fundamental teaching and practices. These involve decisions of the General Conference, the only body that can speak for United Methodism and the only body that represents the judgment of the church as a whole. There is no mystery here. Churches, like any serious organization, have to have ways of thinking through and resolving contested issues. If they fail in this endeavor, they will be severely impoverished. As one of my beloved teachers once noted, there are no problem-free situations. Problems have to be confronted and addressed; decisions have to be made and implemented. United Methodism, from the beginning, has been a conciliar Christian denomination; its General Conference is the highest and last court of appeal. The biblical precedent for this goes back to the Jerusalem conference depicted in Acts 15.

We are now in an initial position to re-describe our predicament. The predicament is not that of maintaining unity in the midst of disagreement; disagreement will always be the case for any serious Christian body. In fact, the default position in both civil and ecclesial institutions is one of tension, personality clashes, dissent, and conflict. In civic life we are fortunate if we do not criminalize the opposition or even kill them. In ecclesial life the discord is less extreme but no less real. The predicament is this: the disagreement about how to handle the issues around human sexuality and represented by wider civic and moral disagreement have reached the point where the central procedures of conciliarity have been challenged by a passionate and sincere minority who cannot and will not abide by its decisions. The issue is no longer one of intense disagreement; it is an issue of ecclesial division made manifest in the development of a network of alternative practices that effectively undermines conciliarity as the ultimate foundation of United Methodist teaching and practice. To use an analogy that Wesley used for the breakdown of his marriage, the water has been spilt and it is no longer possible to gather it up again. As many have noted, the covenant of commitment to the teaching and practices of the church as a whole has broken down.

To be sure we could paint a much more robust picture of unity. Thus John Wesley, following Pauline precedent, looked for unity that would involve unity in mind, judgment, and (perhaps) affection.³ This is clearly a counsel of perfection. It has never existed and never will exist in the life of the church. What is at issue for us is what we might call minimal institutional unity, a unity that can survive all sorts of disagreements in mind, judgment, and most certainly affection.⁴ On this score, the minimal standard of success is straightforward, namely, the disposition and practice of abiding by the decisions and practices of the General Conference. It is precisely this that now no longer exists; hence we are no longer dealing with the maintenance of unity in the midst of disagreement; we are already faced with the stark reality of disunity. So the real issue to

be faced is what to do now that disunity is already a reality. If we want to speak of disagreement, then disagreement centers on how we should deal with the disunity that already exists in our midst.

Put differently, we have reached a fork in the road that has already been crossed and cannot be undone by verbal fiat. The events of the General Conference make this clear. At best we tried in the second week of our deliberations to put a temporary brake on developments. The election of Bishop Karen Oliveto and other ecclesial actions make it clear that “progressives” of various hues have no intention of pulling back. Even a minimal social intelligence can recognize the break that has already taken place within the body as whole. An alternative network of ecclesial teaching and practice is now being implemented with gusto on the ground.⁵ There is no merit in hand-wringing at this point. To return to my Wesleyan metaphor, the water has been spilt, and it cannot be gathered up.

In the light of this analysis, our options are severely limited. I suggest four immediately. First, we can continue to muddle through and do nothing, hoping against hope that folk will learn to live with conciliar chaos. Second, we can regularize the present changes on the ground by formal votes at General Conference.⁶ Third, we can implement an exit for those who cannot accept the teachings and practices of The United Methodist Church on matters related to human sexuality. Fourth, we can work toward formal division by means of General Conference action.

We are not going to muddle through any longer; in a way the decision of General Conference of 2016 to appoint a special commission to deal with the crisis makes this very clear. The second option has also been rejected again and again by action of General Conference; to put the issue firmly, the votes are not there for some third way where we agree to disagree and move on. Barring a massive change of mind on the part of the majority of delegates, the General Conference will stand firm on its canonical commitments as they have been in place since 1972. So the relevant options are the third and the fourth. The third has never really been seriously considered. We can expect massive formal and informal resistance to the fourth. The framing of the issue as one of maintaining unity in the midst of disagreement is a subtle—or perhaps not so subtle—attempt to keep these last two options at bay for as long as possible.

My initial point is that stating the issue in this fashion masks the crisis we face. However, maybe I have exaggerated our predicament. Maybe the water can be gathered up again and we can move forward in unity. Maybe I am underestimating the ingenuity of grace and particular providence in my assessment. Do we not believe that with God all things are possible? If we are serious “supernaturalists,” why not pray for and anticipate a miracle or special act of providence?

In order to tackle this counter-challenge, I propose that we overhear the conversation as articulated in our ecclesial neighborhood. I have in mind the remarkable intervention in the debate about disagreement and unity by Oliver O’Donovan.⁷ Holding together unity and deep disagreement on sexuality is a challenge for not just United Methodism; it has long been a challenge in the Anglican Communion. O’Donovan essentially proposes that the Anglican Communion prioritize unity even as its members continue the conversation about sexuality. Its relevance to the challenges we face in United Methodism is thus immediately secure. His contribution is especially significant for at least three other reasons. First, he is a world-class moral theologian and recognized as such globally; second, he belongs to the evangelical wing of the Anglican Church and thus privileges the authority of scripture in his deliberations; third, his constructive proposals are unique in their multilayered content and sensitivity. Rather than offer a full-scale treatment of his proposals, I shall focus essentially on the elements in O’Donovan that are most relevant to our situation.

Let's begin with two crucial observations that inform O'Donovan's proposals.

First, in the emergence of the gay movement, we face an unprecedented moment in history. "The world has never seen a phenomenon like the contemporary gay consciousness. There have been various patterns of homosexuality in various cultures, but none with the constellation of features and persistent self-assertion that this one presents."⁸ This is well said and needs no comment.

Second, the recognizable novelty calls for sustained engagement with this new consciousness as understood from within the gay world that is inhabited by gay Christians. This is a theme repeated several times by O'Donovan and deserves to be heard at length. Thus in the first chapter he calls on the church

. . . to take up the experience of homosexuals as its leading question. How is this form of feeling to be understood? What are the patterns of life with which it may appropriately clothe itself? As far as I can tell, it is deeply in the interest of gay Christians, men and women, that their experience—by which is meant not merely *sexual* experience, not merely *emotional* experience, and not merely *narrative* of experience, but the whole storehouse of what they have felt and thought about their lives, should become a matter of wider reflection, reflected on by those who are called to this experience, by those who are called to accompany them in their living, by all who share their understanding of living as something they owe an account of to God.⁹

He returns to this theme in his final chapter, drawing on the provocative suggestion of Rowan Williams that gay Christians should articulate out of their experience how Christ is to be presented to the world. Put more sharply, "What good news does the gay Christian have to bring to the church?" What might answering this question entail and yield?

First, answering this question means that gays themselves face up to the moral and intellectual challenges involved.

What the gay experience really is, is a question of huge importance both to gays and non-gays. By no means everyone who speaks from that experience believes that marriage is the right model for conceiving their relationships. Some have seen it as the "bourgeoisization" of gay experience; and there are major advocates for the pattern of friendship. Such a debate among gays, if conducted frankly and in public, will provide essential core reflection, helping the rest of us to feel our way towards an understanding of the dynamic of the experience and a sense of how the good news may bear most importantly on it. If gays are to pursue the debate well, they will need to engage in analogical thinking, which is central to moral reasoning. They will have to ask themselves about likeness of experience and unlikeness, about ways in which known patterns illuminate unknown, about the extending of paradigms to encompass new paradigms.¹⁰

Second, it means that there is real potential for significant improvement in mission.

From the place of special sensibility in which the homosexual Christian may find him- or herself, we may hear a testimony to the way the world confronts our mission in our time, to its fragmented identities, its disjunction of feelings, its cruelties, its dislocations and the peculiar possibilities of redemption that God has put at its heart. The rest of us cannot do without this torchlight shone through the fog of the later modern world in which we, too, must grope our way.¹¹

These observations make it clear that O'Donovan takes with radical seriousness the degree of disagreement that surrounds the debate about sexuality. Thus he takes great pains to undermine

any effort to run away from our disagreements by, say, declaring premature closure to the extended conversation that has to take place. Thus he calls into question efforts to resolve the debate by means of appeal to immediate moral intuition or by recourse to a policy of pluralism. The former is faulted on the grounds that it eschews the need for serious and considered ethical reflection. The latter is faulted on the grounds that it refuses to see that pluralism paradoxically involves approval of what is disapproved.

To advocate pluralism, must paradoxically maintain a kind of approval of what we disapprove . . . to advocate moral pluralism is to say that in principle something that in principle should not be done, should continue to be done all the same.¹²

Thus he resolutely upholds the need to deal with the deep disagreements that are in play. Even more forcefully, he insists on a total rejection of division or schism.

The problem with the notion of separation is its expressive, self-purifying character. It will not wait for God to purify his own church in his own time. Schisms may come, but woe to the church through whom they come! There is no right, or duty, of schism. As unity is given to the church as a gift, it is taken away as judgment. But on no account can disunity be a course of action that the church may embrace in pursuit of its mission of identity. The only justified breach is the one we have to take every possible step to avert, the one that lies on the far side of every conciliar process that can be devised.¹³

One can readily hear large segments of United Methodism rise up and applaud this forthright call to unity in the midst of disagreement. Yet the caveat in the last sentence should make us pause. O'Donovan has not quite shut the door on separation. Thus what he calls for is a concerted effort to have a robust conciliar process where the church can come in time to a common mind on the contested issues that currently confront us. This caveat should not surprise us given an earlier account of our dilemma.

Two contradictory answers press themselves upon us, each with apparent inevitability. On the one hand, we are never justified in breaking communion within the church of Jesus Christ, for schism is sin; on the other hand, communion implies fundamental agreement in the gospel. Those who "go out" from the church of Christ declare that they were not of it (1 John 2:18). Yet disagreement is not something we are free to relativize or set to one side. So unity in the truth turns out to be a commitment that may pull us in opposite directions to opposite conclusions: there is no communion-breaking moral disagreement, on the one hand; on the other, any disagreement is potentially communion-breaking.¹⁴

Given the pressures that arise from our commitment to take disagreement seriously and take unity seriously, the dilemma is to be resolved by digging in deeper together and waiting until we can find a way forward.

The challenge for Anglicans at this point is how to implement this agenda given the polity of Anglicanism. The initial step to pursue was to develop a robust conciliarity. This began with the Lambert Conference of 1998 and its Resolution 1.10, which was picked up in the Windsor Report.¹⁵ The Report aimed to develop traditional Anglican polity by inventing a much more conciliar orientation.¹⁶ Within this version of conciliarity there could be no question of appealing to the Archbishop of Canterbury or even to a council of bishops. The task of the bishops is to lay down guidelines and norms that are to be operative, and, beyond that, oversee the process as a whole. O'Donovan is very clear on what those guidelines and norms should be. So let me round off my exposition by briefly noting what they are.

In broad terms, the debate that needs to take place is hermeneutic rather than emancipatory in nature. Negatively this means that the “liberal” move to settle issues by appeal to immediate moral certainties is rejected. On this front, O’Donovan develops both an etiology and assessment of *liberalism* in theology that reasonable “liberals” should have little difficulty embracing. He acknowledges the strength of “liberals” in leading the church to take up the various challenges of the modern period; he also readily assumes that it is right and proper to pay careful attention to experience, a source and norm they have long championed. However, “liberals” have too readily claimed the moral and theological high ground on the issues by prematurely insisting on their moral certainties as adequate in and of themselves. Thus they have failed to do the kind of deep reflection that is needed. They have become intellectually lazy and even irresponsible.

Turning to the “evangelicals,” O’Donovan is no less severe in his criticisms. They have rightly championed the primacy of scripture and have been careful to subordinate tradition to its authority. However, they too have overreached intellectually by failing to note the implications of the distinction between scripture and the interpretation of scripture. Thus in their own way they have also been too quick to claim certainty for their interpretations of scripture and thus failed to recognize the logic of their own tradition. They have opted for a moralistic confessionalism that is not available.

The antidote to all this is to read not just the text of scripture but also the age in which we live. “There is the interpretive task of discerning *what the text means*, on the one hand; and there is the conscientious task of discerning *ourselves and our position as agents in relation to the text*, on the other.”¹⁷ The latter clearly requires the kind of attention to the sensibilities of gay experience already noted. Once we recognize this dynamic, then the issue is not one of simple obedience to the text.

[I]t is not the commands the Bible contains that we obey; it is the purposes of God that these commands reveal, taken in their context. The purposes of God are the ultimate reason why anything at all is good or evil to do. The Bible is authoritative for ethics because it speaks to those purposes and demonstrates them through God’s acts in history.¹⁸

Moreover, in reading the text in this manner, we rightly pay attention to the whole of scripture with its varied forms of moral instruction; and we must pay appropriate attention to past formulations as we find them in creeds, councils, the writings of theologians, and the like. However, we cannot claim for our interpretation of scripture what rightly belongs to scripture alone.

A seriously meant inquiry into what the Bible means and how it may apply to us can never be out of place in the church. We must not, then, in a supposed defense of a “biblical” ethic, try to close down moral discussion prescriptively, announcing that we already know what the Bible teaches and forbidding another examination. It is the characteristic “conservative” temptation to erect a moment in scriptural interpretation into an unrevisable norm that will substitute, conveniently, and less ambiguously, for Scripture itself. The word “authority” means, quite simply, that we keep looking to *this* source if we are to stay on the right track. Anything else is unbelief—a refusal to open ourselves to the question, What is God saying to us through his word?¹⁹

We can sum up my reading of O’Donovan in this way. The emergence of gay consciousness signals the arrival of a genuinely new situation in history for the church. The challenges it poses for, say, traditional teaching on sexual morality and marriage, has led to a crisis where the deep disagreements that have arisen make it difficult to maintain the unity of the church. We have a

dilemma where realism about the disagreements threatens a commitment to the unity of the church. We must take both equally seriously. Doing this requires conciliar action in which the church listens afresh to the sensibility of gay consciousness, even as it resolutely refuses the option of division. In effect, we need a new round of critical theological reflection; one which pays appropriate attention to the primary demands of scripture, even as there is penetrating attention to not just gay experience but also the tradition of the church.

In framing the summary in this way, it is no accident that this sounds very much like a fresh appeal to the quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. In fact this is, I think, an entirely accurate way to capture the extremely subtle and in some respects brilliant analysis provided by O'Donovan. Thus it sets the scene for the transition to the significance of O'Donovan's proposals for the crisis within United Methodism. Has O'Donovan given us a fresh way of maintaining unity in the midst of deep disagreement? Do his proposals require us to abandon the alternative framing of the crisis we face, namely, how do we handle the breakdown in unity that has already overtaken us within United Methodism?

We might immediately take leave of O'Donovan by noting that what we really have to offer here is a new round of listening and theological debate to be carried out by a new commission to be appointed by the next General Conference. There is no chance of that option being proposed or implemented. We have already been down that road, and we are not about to turn the clock back and try that option one more time. Ecclesial managers may understandably want to hold out for this option, but the days of ecclesial management are over. "Progressives" and others may publicly be in favor, but serious observers may legitimately see this as equivalent to one more attempt at stalling while more boots for change can be put on the ground. However, this is much too abrupt a way of disposing of what we might learn and conclude from an engagement with O'Donovan.

Let's agree for the sake of argument on several of his observations and proposals. First, in the emergence of the gay movement, we face an unprecedented moment in history. Second, this recognizable novelty calls for sustained engagement with this new consciousness as understood from within the gay world that is inhabited by gay Christians. Third, Christians who are gay should be free to articulate and work through the description and assessment of their experience theologically and morally. Fourth, it may well be that, in the future, their deliberations will offer significant improvements in our understanding and practice of mission. Fifth, it is indeed important to not only read carefully our biblical texts but to read carefully how we should apply such texts to our current cultural situation.

However, once we get beyond these important insights, matters become much more complex and contested. For my part, I find O'Donovan's critical comments on "liberal" forms of Christianity generally accurate as applied to the issues in hand. "Liberal" versions of Christianity have no monopoly on truth or intellectual virtue. Hence it is vital that Christians who are gay not follow their lead uncritically and embrace solutions that short-circuit debate by simplistic appeal to immediate moral certainties or that reach for the first weapon of defense that lays to hand. Thus appeals to analogies with women's ordination, or with racism, or appeals to generic moral notions like equality, justice, and liberation are not enough; we need deeper moral analysis and reflection. While I would provide a more robust role for intuition in the epistemology of ethics, I would entirely agree that we need to reach beyond intuition and try to understand the potential rationales, if any, which inform and undergird our intuitions. There are in-house, epistemological issues here that need not detain us.²⁰ Having said all this, I recognize that many will disagree with this assessment of "liberalism."

When it comes to his admittedly terse account of “evangelicalism,” I disagree with O’Donovan on what I can only consider an unfortunate exaggeration when it comes to the stress he puts on the distinction between scripture and our interpretation of scripture. The real issue here is whether we think that divine revelation has a distinctive role in our moral commitments. I take the long-standing appeal to scripture to be a placeholder for taking radically seriously the content of special revelation. When reframed in these categories, I find his proposals unpersuasive. To be sure, there will always be a distinction between revelation and our interpretation of revelation, but if we cannot be relatively sure of what God has revealed to us then revelation is an empty concept.²¹ At the very least, we need sufficient certainty about what God wills for us in order to act on what is given in divine revelation. The kind of sharp disjunction on offer is not just exaggerated in that it overlooks the long-standing conviction that scripture is relatively perspicacious, it also undercuts our sense of the competence of God in giving us access to moral truth.

O’Donovan’s position is in fact representative of a trend that he is reluctant to acknowledge. Theological “liberals” are more often than not former “evangelicals” who have lost faith in the ability of scripture to deliver a definitive word from God and then either appeal to scripture to underwrite “diversity” of opinion or turn to a medley of supplementary norms to resolve the ensuing epistemological crisis. In O’Donovan’s case, the alternative is distinctly Anglican in orientation. Thus it seeks to supplement the appeal to scripture by appeal, initially, to tradition and reason, and now to experience. In this respect, it mirrors the efforts of Albert Outler to solve once and for all the so called problem of authority in Christian theology. “Evangelicals” in United Methodism have been of two minds on what to do about this development. Some but not all recognize the problem; all revere the memory of Albert Outler; and all have done the best they can to keep the ensuing epistemological problems at bay by insisting on the primacy of scripture and the merely supplementary role of tradition, reason, and experience.

My own resolution of the issues involved need not detain us here, but it requires a much more robust account of divine revelation mediated in scripture and, most especially, in the teaching of our Lord.²² This way of reframing the issue undermines the radical instability and indeed agnosticism about the will of God that I think is inescapable in the kind of position developed by O’Donovan. The issue here is not the need for intellectual humility, or the need to be open to further evidence and light; the issue is whether revelation is essentially opaque and needs one more commission to set us straight on what God requires of us. If theology is yet one more theological seminar overseen by church officials and scholars—aided, of course, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit—then I, for one, dissent from this analogy with the life of the church. If we really want to resolve the matters in the conciliar manner proposed by O’Donovan, then the train to take is the train to Rome. Vatican II supplies exactly the medicine that is needed to get us out of this dead end in moral theology. However, Rome alone is no more a solution than scripture alone.

While many “evangelicals” in United Methodism may express alarm at my diagnosis and solution, I think that both the classical and “evangelical” convictions of the church on sexual morality are better secured by my proposals than they by conventional wisdom in contemporary “evangelicalism.” Indeed, the resistance of conservative “evangelicals” to the long-standing pressure in General Conference from various quarters is in my mind only intelligible if we take seriously the kind of account of the formal and material content of divine revelation that I have just briefly articulated.²³ This is not to say, with O’Donovan, that considerations from nature or empirical inquiry are irrelevant.²⁴ The epistemology of ethics is not for the fainthearted or for

those who want easy solutions to complex questions that he rightly identifies. So we can leave the matter here. What is important to note is that O'Donovan's case for further deliberation before we move to resolution of the current crisis is extremely insecure. It ignores the third platitude I noted above, namely, the likelihood of new information or insight becoming available that will break the log-jam is close to nil. Appeals to the work of the Holy Spirit at this stage are, I surmise, whistling in the dark or the use of the Holy Spirit as a labor-saving device. Perhaps the only folk who continue to believe this are the ecclesial managers and institutionalists who quite naturally are driven by fear and anxieties about the potentially apocalyptic futures that await us. However, this may be an unfair reading of the motives of those who are rightly concerned about the dangers of division.

Sorting out the intellectual protocols for future reflection on the significance of gay consciousness is only one desideratum, however. O'Donovan rightly notes the crucial need for conciliar instruments and procedures whereby the Anglican Communion as a whole can move beyond mere intellectual debate and deal with issues that now face the leaders and courts of the Anglican Church worldwide. On this front, we can judge his proposals only as dead on arrival.²⁵ Despite the intellectual and ecclesial horsepower available, the Anglican Communion failed to carry out the agenda mapped out by O'Donovan. In part this is because the Anglican Communion is not a conciliar ecclesial institution. It has neither the will nor the mechanisms for arriving at and implementing canonical teachings and practices on a global scale. The resistance to conciliarity was both fierce and successful; the effort to change the polity needed was simply a bridge too far. Moreover, "progressive" Christians committed to changes on sexual morality saw from the beginning that the whole effort was something of a Trojan horse to impose a conservative position on the church as a whole.²⁶

Even so the Anglican Communion muddles along as it has done in the modern and now late modern period. It can do so precisely because over the centuries it has evolved a kind of *Pax Anglicana* in which various parties—the High church, Low Church, and the Broad church parties—have figured out how to co-exist and make a virtue out of necessity. Each party has its own leaders, its own local churches, its own theological colleges, and its own identity.²⁷ So the deep disagreements on human sexuality are much less of a threat to unity than they are for other ecclesial bodies. The strong aversion to division is in part an effort to secure the status quo that has worked relatively well across the years. It is also an implicit recognition of the apocalyptic consequences that division would have for the legal establishment of the Anglican Church in England. Put differently, the strong claims about division as sin should be read with this in mind; they are not merely theological propositions; they are theological propositions that carry enormous political weight. This is not intended as a crude reductionist reading of O'Donovan; it simply highlights crucial background considerations that cannot be ignored.

These observations spill over into what is at stake in conciliarity as conceived by O'Donovan. His vision of conciliarity is essentially intellectual in orientation. The goal is to advance an agenda of theological reflection that will, to be sure, have practical, ethical, and ecclesial implications. However, it is really a mechanism designed to arrive eventually at some kind of common mind on the most contested issue of our day. As a serious, constitutive element of Anglican ecclesiology, it is severely underdeveloped.²⁸ In reality, Anglicanism can survive as Anglicanism despite the failure to achieve the kind of conciliarity envisaged by O'Donovan.

How should we think of the significance of the foregoing for United Methodism? Taking my observations in order, first, we do not have the equivalence of *Pax Anglica* in United Methodism. We have neither the will nor experience in accommodating the kind of three-party system that

prevails within the Anglican Communion, especially in England.²⁹ Consider, for example, the place of “evangelicalism” within United Methodism. For the most part in some places, “evangelicals” are tolerated as a necessary nuisance or evil rather than seen as an integral movement within the church as a whole. It cannot be ignored because of its numerical strength, its connection with Asbury Theological Seminary, and its success in evangelism and church growth. However, as instantiated in the various and manifold renewal movements in which it is expressed and nurtured, it has never been seriously acknowledged as an integral part of United Methodism. The reason for this is not hard to find. Despite much talk about pluralism over the last generation, United Methodism works off a much more substantial account of its identity than does Anglicanism. Thus, the disagreements that can readily, but not without difficulty, be contained within the Anglican Communion cannot so readily be contained within United Methodism. We have a much deeper sense of what it is to be the People called United Methodists than applies in our Anglican forbears.

Second, our conception of conciliarity is radically different from that envisaged by O’Donovan. It is not first and foremost a mechanism for resolving theological or moral challenges in a robust intellectual fashion. United Methodist scholars (and others) persistently complain about the stupidity of thinking that complex theological and moral issues can even be discussed much less resolved at General Conference. However, this assumes an incomplete if not false reading of conciliarity in our tradition. The role of conciliarity is not that of an extended seminar; its roles are at once more modest and more interesting. One role is to make decisions for the church as a whole. Another role is to operate as an instrument of unity for the body as a whole. It matters not a whit how we prioritize these roles. The crucial point to register is that United Methodism already has in place a conciliar Constitution and practice that is robust and constitutive of its very identity. Thus it rejects the kind of conciliarity manifest in the Roman Catholic Communion; it makes no claim to infallibility, even as it insists that its decisions represent a binding covenant for the body as a whole.³⁰ Nor does it accept the absence of conciliarity as we see it in, say, standard Baptist ecclesiologies, which make the local church the center of gravity in its identity.

We are now in a position to take up again the real options that have to be faced if we are to come to terms with the crisis before us. We are already well into a journey in which a minority, for better or worse, no longer consider the decisions of General Conference as binding. New facts have been created on the ground with the election of Bishop Oliveto and other ecclesial decisions and actions. There is no need to indulge in some kind of adolescent moral handwringing about this development. It is what it is; folk can evaluate Bishop Oliveto as a heretic or a prophet; in their own context such evaluations are no mere casual affairs. The crucial observation to make is not so much moral as ecclesiological. We now have a breach within the church which de facto amounts to disunity, not just in name but in reality. Exactly the same would have to be said were we to have a network of “evangelicals” or “conservatives” defy systematically in practice the decisions of General Conference.

Readers should by now understand why I stand by my reframing of the issues that I undertook in the introduction to this paper. We are long past the time when we can conceive the issue as that of maintaining unity in the midst of disagreement. We are in the midst of a de facto division and must now figure out what to do in response. I also want to reiterate that the real options before us are: either we move toward formalizing the de facto division that is already visible, or we develop an exit plan that makes it possible for those who disagree with the teaching and practices of The United Methodist Church to leave. We cannot muddle through on

analogy with our Anglican forbears; and the option of some kind of middle way where we baptize our divisions by canonical action has not only been systematically rejected by the General Conference, it is incoherent in that it invites us to legitimize and make respectable what we disapprove. In addition, pluralism is a stop-gap strategy; sooner or later it will be replaced by a privileged position, in this case, by the “progressive” position. Of course, this is a matter of judgment but one has to operate by the lights one already has in hand.

Let me cut to the chase at this point. I think that the way ahead lies with an exit plan for those who cannot accept the canonical teaching and practice of the church rather than a plan for division. Why do I recommend an exit strategy rather than a plan of division?

I do not reject a plan of division because I take the hard line on the sin of schism that we noted above in O’Donovan. Even he had to enter a caveat in the wake of his strident denunciations. Interestingly, John Wesley is very clear that church unity is not a non-negotiable or absolute commitment.³¹ I agree with Wesley on this score. There are circumstances in which division is the least bad option before us. Nor do I reject division because I am opposed to the work on ecumenism that has been a central feature of church life until recently. On the contrary, I have long believed that the drive to church unity is one of the great renewal movements of the Holy Spirit in the twentieth century. However, the kind of ecumenism that was so central to the late twentieth century has now run its course and needs to be updated by a more realistic vision of what is possible and a more theologically apt way to move forward.³² Nor do I oppose a plan of division because I want to avoid the obvious catastrophic consequences that are likely to come in its wake. I am overall pessimistic about what will happen. However, if truth be told, the consequences of division, if it happens, are in our own hands, and it will be our responsibility before God if we make things worse than they might be. It is common to say that there are no amicable divorces, but this is empirical nonsense. For the moment, I reject a plan of division because I think the third option mentioned earlier is a much better way forward.

So why do I recommend an exit for those United Methodists who cannot abide by the canonical teaching and practice of The United Methodist Church?

The first reason is represented by the case set forth by O’Donovan for creating the circumstances in which those who adopt a “progressive” agenda in response to the novelty of gay consciousness should be set free to work out their own confessional and theological commitments without the constraints that currently muzzle their endeavors. What is at stake here minimally is a theological and moral research program that should be implemented by those who think that the future of the church rests with them. Put more positively, what is at issue is to make possible the freedom of those Christians—gay and non-gay—to exercise their freedom of conscience in practice. Given the canonical commitments of our General Conference, such freedom of conscience is not possible. Given that the votes to change are not there—and are even less likely to be there in the future—it is time to open a new page in the history of Methodism. It does not matter at this point that by my own lights I do not think that this research program will bear the fruit its adherents promise; on the contrary I deem it to be a serious mistake that represents a further schism in the history of the church. The issues are for me as substantial as the issues that came to the fore in the Nicene controversies in the fourth centuries, in the division between East and West in the eleventh century, in the debates about justification and grace in the sixteenth century, and in the rejection of divine revelation in the nineteenth century. However, all this is strictly irrelevant.³³ Our judgments are fallible; I may well be completely wrong; but I think it is time for progressives to be given their own space to follow the will of God as

determined by their own best judgments rather than mine or by those represented in the decisions of the General Conference.

The obvious rejoinder to this consideration is that it will carry little or no weight with the “progressive” wing of The United Methodist Church. Hence it is dead on arrival. One can only make the case at this point and see what happens. I cannot believe that all progressives will fail to see the logic of the argument. I think that reasonable interlocutors will try it on for size.

The second reason for opting for exit rather than division is straightforwardly pragmatic. Pursuing this option is much less disruptive for all concerned. Beginning with the provisions of the *Book of Discipline* in paragraphs 2547 and 2548, the General Conference should work out an arrangement whereby those who exit may leave, create or join another Christian denomination, and take their property with them.³⁴ While the General Conference may need to update the provisions of 2547 and 2548 in order to allow annual conferences to leave, this should not be all that difficult. It would not appear to involve any constitutional amendments; legislative action should suffice. The initial decisions could be taken at the level of annual conferences who would only have to take action when petitioned in writing, say, by 25 percent of the members of the Annual Conference. The Annual Conference need not take any action at all if there is no significant desire to exit. Once the Annual Conference does decide to take action then, given the gravity of the decision, we should set the bar at the weighted majority of, say, a two-thirds vote in favor. Those churches that cannot go along with the decision of the Annual Conference would follow a similar procedure. Let there be a written petition of 25 percent of the membership to have a vote; then let the whole congregation decide, with a weighted majority of two-thirds required for exit. Perhaps special arrangements would have to be made for properties related to jurisdictions, but with reason and good will this could be worked out along analogous lines. As to changes in name, then I suggest The Progressive United Methodist Church for those who exit and the Evangelical United Episcopal Methodist Church for those who stand in continuity with the current United Methodist Church. Retrieving the term *Evangelical* would be a nice gesture to make up for our failure to take seriously the Evangelical United Brethren component in our heritage. Renaming in fact is a highly charged issue, so my suggestions here are entirely tentative and are intended to make sure we face the difficulties involved.

Clearly this way of moving forward would be preferable to the disruption caused by formal division, where votes would have to be taken across the whole denomination. In the case of exit, we work with the default position of keeping as much as possible the way it is for now.³⁵ Those exiting would be treated fairly as far as property and assets are concerned. Beyond separation, we could take up questions as to how the relevant autonomous new expressions of Methodism might find ways to cooperate in, say, education, relief work, publishing, and the like. Apt bridges could be put in place to secure integrity and efficiency on this front. With division we are looking at massive constitutional changes, potential votes all the way down into local churches, and ongoing litigation in the courts. There is no problem-free journey ahead, but we should surely seek to cause as little disruption as possible, so that the different expressions of United Methodism can immediately implement their own vision of doctrine, discipline, and ministry.

I make a third appeal to the intelligence of my readers across United Methodism. Surely, it is a matter of basic moral integrity that those who disagree with the teachings and practices of the church should follow through on their own convictions and recognize the moral obligation of exiting The United Methodist Church. Once again, I want to acknowledge the sincerity of those who have acted to change the teaching and practices of the church by implementing their own preferred teaching and practices. They are honestly following the light they are convinced God

has given them. They have worked across the years to try to convince the church as a whole that it is mistaken. Some of their tactics strike me as non-rational in the extreme in that they involve the kind of practices that have become commonplace in secular politics. We need not debate the rights and wrongs of these tactics at this point. The relevant point is that the debate is now over; The United Methodist Church has stood firm across the years; there is not going to be a change of mind and heart. So the time has come to recognize the moral obligation to allow The United Methodist Church to abide by and implement its decisions. There is a freedom of not just dissent but assent. It is time to acknowledge the legitimate right of a church to make its own decisions and abide by them; it is also time for those who dissent to acknowledge the moral integrity involved in walking alone and creating their own institutions and practices. Perhaps there is a moral asymmetry between “progressives” and “conservatives” at this point. I have no doubt as to what my own moral obligations would be should I find myself as part of an equivalent but different dissenting minority. I cannot believe that those who dissent in other directions cannot see the force of the logic involved.³⁶

I have no illusions about the potential resistance to what I have argued. In conclusion, I want to consider an obvious objection against my position and make a final comment about the gravity of the crisis we face.

One objection worth considering relates to the crucial role I give to conciliarity as a sign and instrument of unity within United Methodism. We might pose the worry in this fashion. The focus on conciliarity, it might be said, displays a focus on canon law or church discipline that is exaggerated if not misplaced. The central issues before us, that is, issues of sexual morality and identities, should not be handled in this kind of juridical manner. They transcend this way of thinking. More specifically, the focus on conciliarity puts institutions before people, puts law before love, puts legalism before grace, and puts unity before inclusion. Hence there is something fundamentally mistaken in play. We need to rethink the place of conciliarity in the economy of our deliberations.

My answer to this worry is threefold. First, those who tend to argue in this fashion themselves recognize the crucial place of conciliarity in United Methodism. Over the last forty years they have sought in a host of ways to change the mind of the church through their presence and actions at the General Conferences of the church. They implicitly recognize that the church as a whole must tackle the moral challenges that crop up. Conciliarity is the one and only practice that makes this possible in our tradition. Hence the various pithy slogans in play here are an effort to change the subject and re-litigate the debate on sexual morality. This is not where we currently are in the church; we have moved beyond that and must deal forthrightly with the ecclesiological issue of unity and disunity.³⁷

Second, had those who take this line actually managed to change the mind of the church at a General Conference, they would have been the first to appeal to the decisions of General Conference to ensure that their views on the content of canon law were upheld across the board. Again there is an implicit appeal to conciliarity that should be made explicit.

Third, any group (“progressive” or “conservative”) who leave and form their own set of ecclesial institutions will immediately have to develop the new canon law to ensure the implementation of their agenda. Thus, there is no way to escape the crucial place of conciliarity in our deliberations. To think otherwise is an instance of evasion, if not of hypocrisy.

Let me drive home this point by noting the remarkable comments delivered by Albert Outler at the General Conference of 1976. Outler is important, not just because of his historic significance for United Methodism, but because of his role in drafting the material on

homosexuality that stands in *The Book of Discipline*. In his speech to General Conference in 1976, Outler drew attention to a series of articles on the moral crises in our society as a whole, written by Charlotte Saikowski in *The Christian Science Monitor*. He cleverly uses her title to insist that, should the church reject the decisions of 1972, what lays ahead for the church after permissiveness is “More Permissiveness, That’s What!”³⁸ He then proceeds to argue for this answer in typically forthright terms.

[W]e are beings asked, here and now, to condone homosexuality and to welcome avowed, militant, missionary homosexuals into our membership. We are being asked to vote for or against antinomianism, in an acid test. We are being asked to endorse sexual promiscuity in the case of homosexuals (since we do not stipulate marriage), which logically entails endorsement of sexual promiscuity for other Methodists . . . we are now being asked to ignore all this and to pass directly from homosexuality’s decriminalization (1972) to its positive institutionalization (in 1976) and mark you well, to ordination in 1980. . . . This is *wrong*, this is *unwise*, this is a foolproof recipe for irreversible disaster in The United Methodist Church and in the Christian world. I wish there were time and that this matter were in a rational forum in which to debate this matter more calmly and completely. As it is, I can only say, with all possible emphasis, that the import of this issue goes way beyond a practical judgment of a pragmatic sort. It is an issue of conscience; and for me, I aim to vote against antinomianism (as an heir of Wesley would), to vote against moral decadence—and I appeal to this Conference to do the same, decisively!³⁹

I know of few on the “progressive” side of the aisle who would find this line of argument the least bit persuasive. “Progressive” critics of Outler will rightly be the first to rise in protest against his dramatic ruminations. However, the only way to avoid the option of more permissiveness and antinomianism is to develop the canon law that sets relevant standards for sexual morality for membership and ordination. This can be done only through conciliar action. Conciliarity is simply inescapable once we tackle the full contours of the issues involved. So I stand by my account of the crucial place of conciliarity as an instrument of unity in the United Methodist world.

Now, at last to the end and a final comment. If we do not take up the option of an orderly exit for those who reject the teaching and practices of the church, then we are headed for division. The matter of a very different exit is hinted at by Outler in his comments on the place of conscience in his own deliberations. His biographer follows up his section on Outler’s role in the debates and decisions about homosexuality with a poignant speech that was slated to be given at the North Texas Conference. In the end it was not delivered. He begins with a startling observation and then continues with characteristic rhetorical panache.

If it is at all in order, I desire to state, quite briefly why I propose to withdraw from this Conference and The United Methodist Church. . . . I find that *what* this conference has just done (and the way it has been done) is literally intolerable: both to my best judgment and to my Christian conscience. My judgment tells me that this action is disastrous and that it opens the way to further disaster. I do not, however, insist upon my judgement; many of you know well *that* has been overruled before and I have only grumbled. But in this case my conscience is involved and it tells me that what you have done is morally wrong (wrong before God and his moral law). And it is never safe for a Christian to ignore or evade a deeply offended conscience—his own or any others. I do not wish to argue the point: I merely state my reluctant, but deeply pondered conviction.⁴⁰

Outler then continues in full stride.

I was born into the Methodist Church; I have never had any other church nor ever expected to seek another unless it were an enlargement of this one. It is, therefore, a shattering experience to find myself convinced that I can no longer live and work in what this church has now become in good conscience, or to defend this action of yours, even in ambivalent terms. I feel shattered by the prospect of severed ties with so many men and women whom I have loved and labored with—and I do not now see my own way ahead. I leave you, however, without rancor—only with an overwhelming, tragic sadness that a church, that has been known to invoke John Wesley, could have done what he would have been unable to comprehend, much less approve. Parting words are all too often either banal or bitter. Mine are meant to be loving, even if also heartbroken: “Father, forgive them—for surely they cannot have known, really, what they have really done.”⁴¹

We do not know the potential occasion for this speech. Outler himself seemed to have preferred to keep the details secret; we also know that he did not leave The United Methodist Church. However, its import for the gravity of our situation is self-evident. It sums up well what some will find as a poignant and fitting expression of the tragedy that will lie ahead for many. The hour is late and the time for action is now. We should take seriously the option of a *Mexit*, the exit of those who cannot abide by the conciliar teachings and practices of United Methodism. Whether this means the creation of one or two new Methodist bodies in which to house their vision of the Wesleyan tradition is up to those who refuse to abide by the teaching and practice of the church. Those who have already decided to walk alone should be given the opportunity and freedom to follow their convictions in their new edition of Methodism. Equally, those who support the canonical teaching of The United Methodist Church should be given the freedom to uphold and implement their convictions. As we move forward, we should seek to be as non-disruptive as possible. We can leave the rest to history and the providence of God. The only serious and realistic alternative is to prepare for division.⁴²

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In Defense of Mexit: Disagreement and Disunity in United Methodism—William J. Abraham

¹ The reality of disunity is courageously if cautiously acknowledged by my colleague, Ted A. Campbell, in his significant address, “One Faith,” delivered at the World Methodist Conference, September 1, 2016, in Houston. It is also noted in Scott J. Jones, *The Once and Future Wesleyan Movement* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 69.

² In what follows I shall speak in broad terms about human sexuality and gay consciousness. This is a matter of economy of expression and does not mean that I am unaware of the complex realities such terms signify.

³ This is brought clearly in Wesley’s sermon “On Schism.” Interestingly, Wesley focuses on schism within a church rather than schism from a church. It would take me too far afield to track the significance of this for the handling of disputes within United Methodism in recent years. His description of schism and the dispositions involved provide a striking description of much of what is happening *within* contemporary United Methodism.

⁴ There are, of course, other natural conditions of unity. Consider the following: trust in episcopal leadership, effective practices related to discipline and canon law, good will and common sense in tolerating differences, relative agreement on mission, general approval of the policies and actions of general agencies, financial solvency and efficiency, a sense of belonging together in the same body, relative agreement on epistemic authority, and the use of rational practices to resolve disputes. My assumption here is that the practice of conciliarity has a privileged causal role in the maintenance of unity; once there is systematic breakdown in this domain, then failure on other fronts will be multiplied. The whole becomes more than the sum of its parts in terms of their causal consequences.

⁵ It is interesting to note that there is much talk abroad in United Methodism that insists that it is the “evangelicals” and “conservatives” who are the obvious threat to unity. In my first reflections on this I saw this assessment as a

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form of convenient scapegoating. In part, this scapegoating discourse stems from ignorance of the internal complexity of “evangelicalism” in United Methodism. There is clearly a “progressive” stream within the “evangelical” wing of United Methodism that is more than ready to endorse revision in the debates about human sexuality. Moreover, there has long been a strong antipathy to leaving; the general strategy has been to form renewal movements that presuppose continued participation in the life of the denomination. It is certainly the case that recent developments on the “progressive” side have convinced many “evangelicals” that renewal is no longer possible; thus I have no doubt that, if it comes to division, many in the “evangelical” wing of the tradition are more than ready to develop a fresh version of Methodism. Witness the ambivalence of the Wesleyan Covenant Association, which stands poised either to initiate a fresh round of renewal or form a new church. No doubt it is this ambivalence that causes so much alarm in some quarters. However, it is surely patently obvious that it is the “progressive” wing of the church that has decided to walk alone rather than together. I think there is another dimension to the phenomena of blaming “evangelicals” that is worth pondering. Consider this distinction. Compatibilists are those who think that The United Methodist Church can hold together in one body those who differ on sexual morality. This has been central to third-way supporters and finds ready support among many in the leadership of The United Methodist Church. Incompatibilists disagree; they do not believe that the standard contradictory positions can be held together in the one body. Many, but not all, “evangelicals” are incompatibilists. Many compatibilists think that if only folk would get along and be compatibilists, we could move forward to get together in unity despite our differences. Thus it is natural for compatibilists to see division as stemming from “evangelicalism.” However, many “progressives” are also incompatibilists, so this explanation will go only so far. One other observation is worth making here. Many “progressives” take a tough moral line against their opponents. They insist that “evangelicals” should apologize for the harm done by their hate speech; they believe that they should repent and stand up for equality and justice. Consider the following from a leader of the Love Prevails Group: “An anti-queer majority at General Conference, . . . a combination of United States and international conservatives, led and whipped into a hateful frenzy by southern white Americans, has refused to consider our humanity . . . we are in thrall to an unjust body of rules and told the only way to change it is at General Conference, but a General Conference tyranny of the majority is hell-bent on betraying our humanity.” “Evangelicals” have not generally resorted to the language of repentance. They are more concerned to protect their own moral space than engage in forthright calls for repentance. The asymmetry at this point is fascinating. Historians of the future are going to have their hands full sorting out an accurate narrative of what is currently happening.

⁶ The obvious way to do this would be to allow a local option and defend it in terms of, say, subsidiarity, appropriate diversity within unity, the importance of contextual moral and theological options, and the like.

⁷ See Oliver O’Donovan, *Church in Crisis: The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Communion* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008). The material was originally developed as a series of “Sermons on the Subject of the Day,” a title borrowed from John Henry Newman, and made available through the website of Fulcrum, a network of evangelical Anglicans. The material was later published as *A Conversation Waiting to Begin: The Churches and the Gay Controversy* (Norwich: SCM Press, 2009). For an important set of essays that articulate the progressive side of the debate see Andrew Linzey and Richard Kirker, eds., *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism* (New York: O Books, 2005).

⁸ O’Donovan, *Church in Crisis*, 115.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹² *Ibid.*, 50.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 33–34.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30–31.

¹⁵ Resolution 1.10 called for the upholding of a conservative stance on sexual morality. The Windsor Report was produced in November 2004 by the Eames Commission established by the Archbishop of Canterbury to find a way forward without schism. It is readily available on the Web.

¹⁶ Conciliarity involved a covenant where the instruments of union were the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Consultative Council, and the Primates’ Meeting.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 58, emphasis in the original.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 75, emphasis in the original.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 79, emphasis in the original.

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- ²⁰ O'Donovan gives the impression at times that we can always provide a rationale for divine commands. However, this would eliminate the need for divine revelation in the first place. At best divine revelation would prompt us to see for ourselves the reasons behind our moral judgments.
- ²¹ This means I am unpersuaded by those who take revelation to call into question any attempt to capture the will of God in reliable semantic materials.
- ²² I have provided an extended treatment of the epistemology of divine revelation in *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006). For my analysis of John Wesley's epistemology of theology see *Aldersgate and Athens* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010). For a full-scale treatment of the epistemology of theology see William J. Abraham and Frederick D. Aquino, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), forthcoming.
- ²³ The crucial text is that on marriage found in Mark 10:5-12. I am well aware that it is easy to dismiss the resistance of "evangelicals" in terms of fearmongering or power-plays, claims that can be expressed as much by innuendo as by explicit exposition.
- ²⁴ O'Donovan provides a brief but devastating criticism of Robert Adam's attempt to rule out any appeal to nature in chapter 6 of *Church in Crisis*.
- ²⁵ For a spirited rejection of O'Donovan's position by a distinguished Episcopal philosopher and theologian, see Marilyn McCord Adams, "Faithfulness in Crisis," in *Gays and the Future of Anglicanism*, 70–80.
- ²⁶ The point is well made by Marilyn McCord Adams in "Faithfulness in Crisis," 71.
- ²⁷ Anglicans in England have also worked out an ecology of leadership-sharing with respect to the episcopal Sees of Canterbury, York, and Durham that is crucial to their ability to foster unity across deep divisions.
- ²⁸ Anglicans in England have a long history of exceptionally good doctrinal commissions that tackle the thorny issues that crop up in history. The efforts to secure serious theological reflection, say, in the creation of a Faith and Order Commission, have not borne similar fruit within United Methodism. However, it takes time for this kind of work to come to maturity.
- ²⁹ It is no accident that leading United Methodist scholars object to efforts to divide the church neatly into two and only two groups. They readily protest that they belong to neither. However, opting for three is not going to be any more successful; we can be sure that others will still find themselves left out of the taxonomy.
- ³⁰ Efforts to upgrade the decisions of General Conference in the direction of infallibility have been tried and found wanting given our Protestant sensibilities.
- ³¹ See the latter part of his sermon, "On Schism." It is often said but rarely argued that *schism*, because of its acute sinful nature, should not even be considered as an option. This was not the position of John Wesley who allowed for external division under certain circumstances.
- ³² The crucial change is represented in Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*.
- ³³ Ted A. Campbell has perceptively noted that the issue has become a matter of "*status confessionis*," that is, what teachings and practices are utterly necessary for the unity in a Christian community, and those teachings and practices that do not have this status." See his address, "One Faith," 16. He does not take up the issue of criteria for identifying matters that are *status confessionis*. On this score we simply do not have any agreed criteria and are not likely to secure them. It may well be that we first find ourselves committed to what counts as a matter of *status confessionis* and only retrospectively work on the relevant criteria. To use the language of recent epistemology we are "particularists" rather than "methodists." The exact same point can be made by noting that we cannot agree on criteria for apt diversity in the midst of unity.
- ³⁴ I realize that this will be the Achilles' heel of my proposal for many. I stand by the long-standing component in canon law that has long been clear: all property belongs to The United Methodist Church. Thus, generally those who currently want to leave should (indeed must) abide by this ruling. However, we currently face an extraordinary crisis where issues of property may have to be handled *temporarily* in a way that deals with the crisis we face. No doubt the devil is in the details, but I cannot believe they cannot be resolved.
- ³⁵ I have no illusions about the significant changes that would be needed to make United Methodism fit for purpose in the years ahead, but these can be tackled only once we resolve the current crisis.
- ³⁶ One could readily add a further subsidiary moral argument. There comes a point when the internal strife should simply come to an end; we have hurt one another enough across the years; it is time to move on. I also think that, handled properly, fresh energy tied to a more robust identity could see different configurations of Methodism flourish in the years to come.
- ³⁷ I am also convinced that those who support the position of the *Book of Discipline* have barely begun to tackle the theological, moral, and pastoral issues that need to be addressed. This is no doubt in part because of the intense internal strife that has been in place for decades and that needs to end.
- ³⁸ Quoted in Bob Parrott, *Albert C. Outler: The Gifted Dilettante* (Anderson, IN: Bristol Books, 1999), 401.

³⁹ Ibid., 400–401, emphasis in the original.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 404, emphasis in the original.

⁴¹ Ibid., 404–405.

⁴² By far the most interesting possibility on this front is the preconciliar option in which (1) a United Methodist Council of Churches would be formed for joint action and collaboration, (2) United Methodism would be reconfigured into two or three distinct, autonomous Methodist denominations with their own bishops, *Book of Discipline*, finances, and the like. The Council (not itself a church or denomination) would allow for continued interchange and fellowship. The distinct denominations would allow for distinct identity and new vitality. However, it is obvious that this option will be demanding in the extreme to implement.