

Where Will You Go from Here?

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Introduction

As I begin, I have two confessions to make. The first confession is that I am no longer a member of The United Methodist Church, having transferred my orders as an elder in full connection to the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in 2014. I did not leave over the issue of human sexuality, though that was (and is) a subject over which the church universal has much work still to do. My second confession is that I do not believe The United Methodist Church will survive the struggle over this issue intact. It is not in my nature to be pessimistic; however, I am a pragmatist, and, on most occasions, a realist, and given what I've read, seen, and heard, I believe schism is inevitable.

Even as I thank the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry for convening the colloquy, and the Reverend Albert Mosley, the President-Dean of Gammon Theological Seminary at the Interdenominational Theological Center for his gracious invitation to participate after the initial invitee had to withdraw, I must admit to being a bit confused as to why this colloquy was convened. The subject of the colloquy as stated was, "The Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality: Toward a Faithful United Methodist Witness." My confusion originates with the words *unity* and *witness*; not the meanings, but exactly what the colloquy goals seemed to be. I believe we were convening as professors from United Methodist seminaries and Asbury Theological Seminary to discuss the issue of human sexuality, more directly, the issue of same-gender sexuality, relationships, and ordination, in light of United Methodist doctrine regarding this issue. We were asked to participate in conversations, dialogue, and discussions on how The United Methodist Church might move forward together in unity toward a faithful witness. However, in my research for this colloquy, I contacted members, pastors, and leaders of The United Methodist Church, and I am not sure that more dialogue among professors will yield different results than what has already occurred.

Research vs. Experience

My research¹ points to several areas of conflict around the issue of same-gender sexuality, including scriptural interpretation on the issues of creation, same-gender sexual relations, and same-gender sexual orientation, if same-gender sexuality is a choice, if same-gender sexuality can be "changed," and if same-gender sexuality is a mental illness or addiction that can be "cured." I've read texts on how to interpret the issue based on the Wesley quadrilateral and the Social Principles, as well as personal statements both for and against the full acceptance and affirmation of same-gender sexuality. Most of the research was scholarly, well-documented, and attempted to consider both sides of the issue. Some articles and book chapters were argumentative and some were extremely exclusionary, to my dismay. As I read, however, it occurred to me that most of these articles and chapters were written for the audience who would most accept the document's premise. If an article was included in a text affirming same-gender sexuality, the reader would use it to defend the inclusion of same-gender sexuality. Likewise, a chapter included in a text arguing against same-gender sexuality would be used for that purpose.

Persons seeking a balanced presentation of the issues would need to read all the articles and chapters, and perhaps that might happen in the best of all possible worlds. However, my experience as a member and pastor in The UMC, and subsequently as an observer, has shown me that, quite often, a balanced presentation is not what is experienced. I will use two personal experiences in two separate conferences to elaborate my meaning.

When I was United Methodist, I was a member of the North Georgia Conference. Georgia, as most, if not all of us, know, is an extremely conservative state. It is part of the Bible belt, so-called because of its conservative evangelical and political leanings and because church attendance is generally higher than the national average. Whenever there was a vote on topics related to social issues (e.g., poverty, welfare, diversity and inclusion, gender and sexuality), there was always vigorous discussion and debate regarding said issue, the result of which was usually the defeat of any motion or appeal of anything that could be construed as part of the “liberal” agenda. There would certainly be no affirmation of the sexuality of LGBTQIA² persons, let alone an agreement to affirm same-gender loving relationships, marriage, or the ordination of these persons. When votes were taken to elect delegates to the General Conference, there was always a move afoot to make sure those who won would uphold the *Book of Discipline* and not be swayed by any demonstrations or arguments to the contrary.

In stark contrast to the overarching identity and personality of the North Georgia Conference is the membership of the California/Nevada Annual Conference. I had three opportunities to witness them in action, when I served as the worship leader for their annual conferences in 2013, 2014, and 2016. The first difference that struck me was the racial and ethnic diversity among attendees. Whereas the North Georgia Conference consisted mainly of Anglo and African Americans, the Cal/Nevada Conference included Native, Anglo, and African Americans, as well as large numbers of persons of Asian, Pacific Islander, Latina/o and Mexican descent. But what was even more striking was the number of persons who self-identified openly as same-gender loving, who were openly living in same-gender marriages or committed relationships, and some who were transgender. California is a much more liberal state politically, and this was clearly reflected in the discussions and voting that took place during those annual conferences. Moreover, the affirmation of same-gender sexuality, relationships, and ordination became crystal clear when the Reverend Karen Oliveto, a married lesbian, was elected to represent the conference as the episcopal candidate during the 2016 Annual Conference and, a month later, was elected to the episcopacy from the Western Jurisdiction of The UMC. Indeed, her election has pushed the issue of same-gender sexuality even closer to the forefront of United Methodism. If there were those willing to ignore the calls for inclusion and affirmation of same-gender ordination and relationships, there is no ignoring it now.

While some have championed the election of Bishop Oliveto, others have decried it as symptomatic of a church that has refused to deal adequately with the issue. Many believe it is because The UMC has attempted to find a *via media*, rather than uphold the *Book of Discipline*; that The UMC has lost its way. Many are willing to agree that same-gender loving persons are of sacred worth and are welcome in the denomination, but draw the line at the affirmation of relationships, marriages, or ordination of same-gender loving persons. As I write this chapter, two UM churches in Mississippi have withdrawn from the denomination, and others are threatening to leave, while some are withholding apportionments until the Bishops’ Council takes what they believe to be the only stance possible, upholding the *Book of Discipline*. One can see the issue dividing the church, almost to a conference, by jurisdiction or regional geography. The division along jurisdictional lines reminds me of the election of the late Bishop Leontine

Kelly to the episcopacy from the Western Jurisdiction, although she was a long-time member of the Southeastern Jurisdiction. I would surmise that Bishop Kelly knew it was highly unlikely that she would be elected from the Southeastern Jurisdiction; and indeed, the first African American female was not elected to the episcopacy from that jurisdiction until this past summer, the Reverend, now Bishop, Sharma Lewis. I cite this recollection for two reasons: 1) to highlight the overarching differences in politics, theological stances, and inclusivity among jurisdictions, and 2) to mark the amount of time it has taken for change to occur for the first African American female to be elected to the episcopacy—thirty-two years.

Some may argue, “Well, let’s wait; let’s keep pressing, change will come, however slowly.” I agree that change does indeed come; however, we are dealing with two very different factors in the present issue of same-gender sexuality. First, no texts in the Bible state that persons of African descent are an abomination to the Lord. Biblical texts used to demonize and relegate persons of African descent to enslavement were clear misuses and misinterpretations of texts that never mentioned Africans or persons of African descent. Second, there can be no argument that persons of African descent are born as we are. We do not decide after birth that we will become of darker hue or that we will carry the genetic codes of Africa in our veins. Further, the objection of Anglo and Anglo-descended persons to the inclusion and affirmation of persons of African descent had to do with power, control, and capitalism, not sexual behavior. Conversely, there are texts in the biblical canon stating directly that same-gender sexual behavior is ungodly. The writer of Leviticus calls it an abomination to the Lord (Lev. 20:13), and Paul’s letter to the Romans describes it as unnatural (Rom. 1:26-27). Though many scholars have offered interpretations of these texts designed to dismantle arguments against the affirmation of same-gender sexuality, other scholars have written as extensively from the opposing viewpoint. Furthermore, how many persons (not attending seminary) are going to read these texts and engage in scholarly debate regarding the issue? Many are willing to affirm same-gender loving persons’ sacred worth, but not the full expression of their sexuality, because they have heard and been taught for too long that same-gender sexuality is an abomination to the Lord and is unnatural. They are not willing to risk being on the wrong side of the issue (or the Lord) over something that many believe is a personal choice or the result of childhood sexual abuse.

Hypocrisy at the Table and Growing Up Fundamentalist

We may wonder why those opposing same-gender sexuality don’t rail with the same vigor against other sins cited in Leviticus or Romans. I believe it is because, over millennia, many of those sins have been forgotten, understood within the context of the texts, or designated as part of the Old Covenant. For example, in Leviticus, chapters 19 and 20, there are several laws designated as ritual and holiness codes that are no longer observed by many, if not most Christians, including proscriptions against wearing blended fabrics, eating shellfish, hybrid breeding of animals or planting of seeds, and sex during a woman’s menstrual cycle. However, I find it interesting that in Romans, which is a New Testament text and therefore definitely part of what Christians would consider the New Covenant, several of the sins mentioned are not treated in many Christian communities with the same vehemence or distaste as same-gender sexual relations. Paul condemns those who engage in envy, strife, deceit, craftiness, and gossip, as well as those who are insolent, haughty, boastful, or rebellious toward parents; to be certain, these are not welcome attributes in any Christian community. It is rare, however, to hear of Christian communities, particularly in The UMC, calling out these sins, or calling for persons found guilty

of these sins to be unable to participate fully in the life of the church. Is it because these sins can be committed privately, without one's Christian community knowing they are being committed? Are these sins seen as merely personal foibles, human failings, and therefore, acts to which we all can fall prey? Does adultery fall into that category as well? I ask because adultery is mentioned in both Old and New Testament texts as sin, and is still considered sin in modern societies. Each of the Synoptic Gospels contains texts in which Jesus mentions adultery, stating that any man divorcing his wife and marrying another commits adultery, and any man marrying a divorced woman commits adultery (Mark 10:11-12; Matt. 5:31-32; Luke 16:18).³ Even though Jesus' words are clear regarding divorce and adultery, most Christian communities do not seek to deny those guilty of divorce or adultery full participation in Christian community. They are not denied the right to enjoy other romantic/sexual relationships; nor are they denied the ability to answer callings to ordained ministry. Why, then, is same-gender personhood and sexuality treated differently?

I submit it is first because many of us are guilty of one or more of the aforementioned sins, including adultery, either directly or indirectly; and because we are, we have made those sins not as terrible. We have diluted the severity and consequences of these sins to absolve ourselves of guilt over the ways we treat one another and our communities. Envy, strife, deceit, craftiness, gossip, insolence, haughtiness, and boastfulness or pride are all sins that can and do affect communities negatively; but because we all fall prey to these, we simply write litanies, confessions, and prayers to be read and recited during worship and leave it at that. Even adultery, as biblically defined, has become a mainstream "ill," almost a necessary evil, because so many of us, for whatever reasons, decide to end our marriages. Even clergy who confess to committing adultery are not banished from the church and prohibited from serving congregations forever. And their lifestyles are certainly not labeled as "incompatible with Christian teaching."

Second, I believe same-gender sexuality is treated differently because many of us are uncomfortable with it. Our discomfort stems from many and various reasons, including how we grew up, what we were taught was natural and normal, what was unnatural and abnormal, what was an accepted way of being and living, and what most certainly was not. I will use my own experience as an example. Growing up in Mississippi, the "buckle" of the Bible belt, the child of deeply religious parents, belonging to a fundamentalist Baptist church, one could imagine my foundational beliefs regarding sexuality. Sex was permitted only within the context of marriage. The subject was rarely discussed, at church or at home, but when it was preached in church, most often it was around the issue of immorality and the punishment various biblical characters suffered as a result. There was never any discussion of sex as God's good gift to a good creation. Discussions at home were pretty much the same; keep your pants zipped up and your dress tail down because if you don't, trouble awaits. On the issue of homosexuality, there was never any question that it was taboo in my immediate community. When my pastor preached against immoral perversions that were consuming the world, homosexuality was definitely one of those addressed. My mother referred to gay men as sissies and lesbians as "funny." There were men and women in our church who were suspected of being homosexual. And, as the interviewees remembered, these people were never confronted, nor was the issue of their being a part of the congregation ever addressed publicly. However, most people in my community (especially my church) viewed homosexuality very negatively. No one wanted to be identified as one of "them."

I remember this dichotomy quite well, because my mother's actions were excellent examples of how it operated. She was genuinely nice to everyone, regardless of any suspicions she might have held regarding their sexuality. I remember how she treated one man in particular. He was

what many would call a “flaming” sissy, definitely “out;” however, he seemed to be accepted by the congregation whenever he came to church. Most often, he would come during Vacation Bible School, possibly because he knew my mother and godmother were generally in charge. They were always very motherly toward him, inviting him into conversations, inquiring about his general well-being, and allowing him to lead some VBS activities. They rarely talked about his sexual status in front of me (I was not even a teenager at the time), but I vaguely remember asking my mother about him being gay and what made him that way. She said she didn’t know; that some people were just that way.

Some might say that these actions meant my mother was very forward thinking and acting in terms of the issue of homosexuality. However, I believe my mother had the freedom to act that way since the issue was one she could avoid. She was an “old married woman” with a child. No one was going to suspect her of being gay because she was friendly toward gay people. The people she believed to be homosexual were not immediate family, and she was going to be present at all times with other people (“straight” and gay) to make sure nothing sexual occurred to or with her child. However, if I had grown up to be lesbian, I’m sure my mother would not have been okay with it. Why? Because even though my mother treated everyone lovingly, she was still a Bible-believing Baptist. She believed biblical proscriptions against sexual immorality, including homosexuality. She ascribed to a “love the sinner, hate the sin” position.

My views on sexuality definitely were framed by this history. As a young adult, I mirrored my mother’s views almost exactly. I treated everyone with loving concern, but I still believed that sex belonged within the context of marriage and that homosexuality was a sin. As with my mother, it was not difficult to hold these beliefs because none of my close friends or family was homosexual. It was not my responsibility to worry about people’s salvation; everyone had to deal with their own actions and the resulting consequences (more of the “love the sinner, hate the sin” position). I remember when I began teaching, a student asked me about AIDS and whether I believed it to be a curse from God against gays. I answered him by stating that I did not believe God sent AIDS as a curse against particular people, but that when the God-given order of things was disturbed, serious consequences resulted. I believed homosexuality to be against the God-given order of creation. And I might still believe that today were it not for what I witnessed at Cascade United Methodist Church.

An Ongoing Journey

When I came to Atlanta in 1990, I joined Cascade because of Reverend Joe Lowery’s preaching. He always preached on social justice themes and often would mention gay rights causes. When he did this initially, I was quite surprised, as I had never heard any preacher defend gays from the pulpit. (I did not know a woman could be an ordained minister until then, either.) In addition to this, I noticed that every Sunday, there were two men who always sat next to each other. During one of Rev. Lowery’s sermons, he noted their relationship as an example of loving commitment. I was shocked by this knowledge; yet it opened a door to my future theological development on this issue.

After this incident, I began to question my beliefs. I began to wonder about the way the church perceives and receives people. I questioned the condemnation of people based on their sexuality. But I did not know how I would support a different belief based on my fundamentalist biblical background. And then, I answered God’s call to ordained ministry and had to come to seminary. What a change was wrought in my understanding and belief system! As I began

classes at Candler, I was also in the ordination process in The UMC. One of the major issues for me within this process has been The UMC's stance on homosexuality, a typical "love the sinner, hate the sin" stance. I already had questioned the effectiveness of this model and realized it was insufficient. I began to see and understand this as a result of getting to know people intimately and seeing that gay people were just like me, not aberrations of creation, but people made in the *imago Dei* trying to live life abundantly. As I sought a foundation for the change in my beliefs, I read many texts, particularly for courses in New Testament, Ethics, and Sexuality and the Black Church. One of the texts that had the most influence on me was Gary Comstock's *A Whosoever Church*.⁴

I appreciated *A Whosoever Church* for several reasons. First, it provides a viable alternative to traditional understandings and interpretations of the Bible. Several of the interviewees address the use of biblical passages to condemn homosexuality. However, they also note that the Bible has been used to support slavery and the oppression of women. Therefore, if the church is going to stand on the Bible as inerrant on the issue of homosexuality, it must accept the Bible's inerrancy on these other issues, as well. This book helped me to ask whether or not the church is willing to do that. Second, the author asks very pragmatic questions. How do ministers communicate to the community that all are welcome? In what particular actions or ministries are their churches involved that bespeak a commitment to the same-gender loving community? What particular actions have ministers themselves taken on behalf of same-gender loving persons in their churches? Comstock addresses Christian response to same-gender sexuality not only in theory but also in practice. This was helpful as I began to develop a personal response as well as how a congregation I served might develop a communal response. Another question this book helped me wrestle with was, "How can someone be affirmed when an inherent part of her, her sexuality, is not affirmed?" God created us as sexual beings, so how can a life be lived abundantly when one is asked to deny part of oneself?

Comstock's book was one of several that helped me examine and broaden my personal understanding of same-gender sexuality and same-gender loving relationships. This evolution led to one of my senior projects, a Bible study entitled, "The Black Church and Homosexuality." I began with a historical perspective on same-gender sexuality in the church. I asked the following questions: What, historically, has the church said about homosexuality? On what foundations have the prevailing Christian teachings regarding homosexuality been based? Why do most Christians believe as we do? I quoted scholars such as Walter Wink, James Nelson, and Beverly Harrison, in my attempt to foster open dialogue on a subject that, particularly in the Black Church, has been viewed as taboo. I thought that the presentation of scholarship in such an open manner would create dialogue, eventually leading persons to reconsider their personal beliefs regarding same-gender sexuality.

Even with the extensive scholarship available to those participating in the study, however, I had to acknowledge that many members continued to express disapproval, if not disgust, of the practice of same-gender sexuality. Many men, particularly, expressed hostile feelings towards same-gender loving men. As some scholars note⁵, this hostility seemed to stem from discomfort at the idea of sex between two men. It is not the idea of two men loving each other, because many men will openly acknowledge their love for another man. It is the act of a man being penetrated in a similar way that women are penetrated during heterosexual sex. In a hierarchical understanding of male/female relations, many men believe the man is supposed to be the dominant partner, the penetrator during sex, and if a man is being penetrated, he must be taking on the "female" role in the relationship. This view is not necessarily shared, particularly among

men, regarding female same-gender sexuality. Many men have no problem with women expressing same-gender sexual feelings, particularly as part of pornographic activity. Ironically, though, some men are insulted by women “choosing” to be lesbians or in lesbian relationships. Men (and women) who think this way view same-gender sexuality as unnatural and perverted, and therefore, cannot affirm these persons’ relationships.

It is telling that I created this Bible study more than ten years ago, as a seminarian, and, outside of the class in which it was shared, have not attempted to present it in any of the contexts I’ve served since. When I graduated, I was appointed to a very conservative Anglo church where I was sure its content would be highly provocative, if not deeply offensive to most members, so I never spoke with the senior pastor about the possibility of leading it. In 2005, I was appointed to the Interdenominational Theological Center faculty, which allowed me to discuss these topics with other faculty, broadening my understandings and providing me with more research. I heard from other voices at the table, and engaged in dialogue with persons who shared a myriad of perspectives on this issue. I currently pastor an African American congregation not part of the United Methodist denomination, and preach a liberative, inclusive gospel, and may revisit this study as a way to foster conversation with those who’ve expressed a desire to talk about why The United Methodist Church stands where it does on this subject.

Moving Forward: Implications and Conclusions

After all that has transpired, thousands of years of church tradition, hundreds of years of biblical scholarship and psychological research, and decades of personal testimonies, how can The United Methodist Church move forward in “unity, toward a faithful witness”? I am not sure. Excellent essays have been written by United Methodist scholars, clergy and lay, arguing for the affirmation of same-gender loving persons, using as bases the Wesleyan quadrilateral, the Social Principles, and testimonies of changed perspectives, a result of personal experiences.⁶ Countless protests have occurred during annual and general conferences to bring attention to this issue. Blogs and vlogs have addressed the need for The UMC to reconsider its stance and change its doctrine to affirm and ordain the full personhood (sexuality included) of all persons. Though there has been some movement toward full inclusion, there has been no resolution on the issue since the language “homosexuality is not compatible with Christian teaching” was added at the General Conference in 1972. The questions for me are, “What does it mean to be a faithful witness?” and “How can unity be achieved in the face of such entrenched division?” Some will argue that to be a faithful witness means being faithful to a literal reading and interpretation of biblical texts regarding same-gender sexuality. Others will argue that being a faithful witness means being faithful to Wesley’s call to “do no harm.” And though time often does bring change, I am almost sure that same-gender loving persons are not willing to wait another thirty-two years to be treated equally in a denomination they have lovingly and diligently served without reciprocity.

Although I do not feel very hopeful regarding The UMC’s unified future, I will conclude with a word of hope. One of the tenets of Methodism that I hold to, over and above all else, is sanctification and the idea that it is a lifelong journey, not a momentary occurrence. To my understanding, sanctification includes the conviction that the love of Jesus Christ and the Spirit of the living G-d propel me forward, knowing that I do not have to have all the answers today. It further means for me that I cannot throw away relationships with sisters and brothers because of how they believe G-d has made them and how G-d is working in their lives, if their witness is not

damaging my well-being. Sanctification helps me understand that even though I may have believed something twenty or ten or even two years ago, I can use the guiding light of Spirit to grow and change theologically. As Methodists, we are supposed to be moving toward being made perfect in love, together with community. It is the addition of “in love” that makes all the difference. If we are committed to loving our sisters and brothers, we must live in the tension of not being in the same place, theologically or personally that others may be. Moreover, we may have to give up some power and become vulnerable, which, for most of us, is terribly uncomfortable, but necessary for all voices and bodies to be welcome at the table. If we are worried about missing heaven by including fully persons regardless of sexuality, I submit that we are missing it now, because the body of Christ is divided. However, by allowing the light of Spirit to guide, we may be brought along the path together. I pray it will be so with the whole church. Amen.

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¹ I cannot list all the works I’ve read that have contributed to my research on this issue. However, some of the more impactful works on my personal journey include *From Christ to the World*, Wayne Boulton et al., eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994); Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999); Cain Hope Felder, ed., *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); and Paul Jersild et al., eds., *Moral Issues and Christian Response* (Australia: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 1998). Research directly related to the United Methodist struggle on same-gender sexuality include: Maxie Dunnam and H. Newton Malony, eds., *Staying the Course: Supporting the Church’s Position on Homosexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003); and Tex Sample and Amy DeLong, eds., *The Loyal Opposition: Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000).

² The acronym LGBTQIA represents the following categories of sexual identification: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual.

³ The Matthean text provides an escape clause, stating that anyone who divorces, except in cases of sexual immorality, commits adultery.

⁴ Gary Comstock, *A Whosoever Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

⁵ See Beverly Harrison, “Misogyny and Homophobia,” in *From Christ to the World*, eds. Wayne Boulton et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 333–35. Also see Delroy Constantine-Simms, “Is Homosexuality the Greatest Taboo?” in *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*, ed. Delroy Constantine-Simms (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2000), 76–87. Also see Cornel West, “Black Sexuality: The Taboo Subject,” in *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Society*, eds. Rudolph Byrd and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 301–310.

⁶ See Sample and DeLong, *The Loyal Opposition*.