

Grounds for Unity in The United Methodist Church and a Proposed Way Forward

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*Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria
had peace and was built up*

—Acts 9:3 NRSV

How rare a moment it was, even in the early days of the Christian community depicted in the Acts of the Apostles, that the church “had peace and was” edified (KJV) or “built up.” We do not live in such a moment, though I pray for it: may Christ have mercy on us, and give the church peace and edification in our time.

Discerning What Is Necessary for Unity

What is necessary for the unity of a Christian community? It is not a new question. The apostolic council recorded in Acts 15 addressed just such a question: to what extent were specific provisions of Jewish law regarding circumcision and food purity (*kashrut*) necessary for the unity of a Christian community? Similarly, in the AD 300s, the teaching of the Alexandrian presbyter, Arius, that Christ was a created being, provoked Christian communities to define more carefully what they believed and confessed to be necessary for their unity.

In the case of Arianism, the churches decided through the process of receiving the teachings of the first councils of Nicaea and Constantinople that it *was* necessary for the unity of the church to define and to confess corporately Christ’s identity as God, “true God from true God, of one being with the Father.”¹ But in the case of the apostolic council in Acts 15, the decision of the community was *negative*, that is, the council decided that Gentile converts were *not* to be bound by the laws regarding circumcision and *kashrut* that had defined Jewish identity. Christians were not *forbidden* from these practices, but they were not mandated and thus left to the discretion of individual persons.

New times bring new issues to the fore, and in response to these issues, Christian communities have to decide what is necessary for unity. Issues that had not been defined in the past come to be crucial, community-dividing issues on which decisions must be made, not simply on the basis of what is right or proper, but also on what is absolutely necessary for the unity of a Christian community. In the face of Nazism, a group of German-speaking Christian leaders issued the Barmen Declaration (1934), declaring not only their opposition to Nazi racial ideology but also that in the crisis of their time and place, opposition to the Nazi ideology must be regarded as *status confessionis*, that is, strictly necessary for the unity of the church.²

I want to consider, then, what have been the historic grounds for unity in the Wesleyan movement, in American Methodist churches, and in the Evangelical and United Brethren churches. I will attempt to frame the contemporary question of whether teachings about homosexual practice should be elevated to *status confessionis*, that is, necessary in the current situation of the church for its global unity. I will conclude with a proposal grounded in the

historic practice of our churches that offers a difficult, but I believe promising, way forward for The UMC.

Historic Grounds of Wesleyan, Methodist, and Evangelical United Brethren Unity

What have been the historic grounds for unity in the Wesleyan movement, American Methodist churches, and churches of the Evangelical and United Brethren families?

Although Methodist societies were open to all who desired, “to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins,”³ John Wesley presupposed a level of unity within the Church of England.⁴ In a manuscript note, John Wesley once defined the Church of England as, “that body of people, nominally united, which profess to uphold the doctrine contained in the Articles and Homilies, and to use Baptism, the Lord’s Supper and Public Prayer, according to the Common Prayer Book.”⁵ His definition laid out grounds of unity on the Church of England, but only doctrinal and liturgical unity, omitting any reference to unity within the polity of the Church of England, and that of course was the area where John Wesley (as opposed to his brother Charles) differed most explicitly from the Church of England, specifically, on the matters of lay preaching, itinerant preaching, and his own authority to ordain other clergy.

As a religious movement operating primarily within the Church of England, the Wesleyan societies had three general grounds of unity:

1. the General Rules as the basic contract that united all members of Wesleyan societies;
2. the Minutes of the Annual Conferences as enunciating the grounds of unity for “the preachers called Methodists”;⁶ and
3. the stipulation in model deeds that in Wesleyan chapels, “the persons preach no other doctrine than is contained in Mr. Wesley’s *Notes upon the New Testament*, and four volumes of sermons.”⁷

This last expression allowed for a surprising degree of latitude. Calvinistic preachers, for example, were regularly invited to preach in Wesleyan chapels, with the understanding that they would *not* preach on the doctrine of limited atonement or other subjects not expressed in the Wesleyan standards.⁸ Similarly, when the early nineteenth-century British Methodist biblical scholar Adam Clarke concluded that the term “the Son” applied to the Second Person of the Divine Trinity only *after* the conception or birth of Jesus (his reading of Luke 1:35), the British Conference requested him not to speak *on this subject* in Wesleyan societies.⁹ In other words, one could hold beliefs contrary to these expressed in the Wesleyan standards, but one was not to *speak* on those subjects in Wesleyan chapels.

The organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States brought about a fundamentally new situation for the definition of unity. No longer understanding themselves as a religious society, Methodists in North America began to function as a church, and this required more extensive definitions of unity. The Christmas Conference (1784) adopted the following as grounds of unity in the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC):

- A revised set of minutes adapted by Coke and Asbury from the earlier British Wesleyan Minutes. This would eventually be published as *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*.

- Wesley’s redaction of 24 Articles of Religion from the 39 Articles of the Church of England, adding an additional Article on allegiance to the government of the United States.
- Wesley’s adaptation of the Book of Common Prayer, *The Sunday Service of the Methodists in North America*, as the liturgy of the new church.

The newly adopted Minutes did not have reference to the Wesleyan standards (*Sermons* and *Notes*), but the bishops of the MEC added doctrinal treatises to the early Minutes or Disciplines explaining distinctive Methodist teachings. The Conference presupposed both the General Rules and John Wesley’s edition of *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* (1780). The MEC would later include the General Rules in the *Doctrines and Disciplines* and would offer different versions of hymnals over the next years.

A crucial development that continues to have implications for the definition of United Methodist unity today came in 1808, with the adoption of a Constitution for the Methodist Episcopal Church. The Constitution adopted in that year including six Restrictive Rules that restricted the General Conference from changing these elements of Methodist Episcopal Church life:

- the doctrine enshrined in the 25 Articles of Religion;
- the ways of life enshrined in the General Rules;
- the principal of proportional representation of clergy (only clergy at that time) in general conferences;
- the “itinerant general superintendency”;
- the right of clergy to a trial if accused of an offense that would lead them to be removed from ministry; and
- the use of proceeds from the Book Concern solely for the support of “old and worn-out” clergy.¹⁰

Among the various items that had been approved at the Christmas Conference, liturgy was not protected in the Restrictive Rules, although by 1800, the rituals for the sacraments, marriages, funerals and burials, and ordinations had been printed in the *Doctrines and Discipline* and remained fairly consistent through the beginning of the twentieth century. The Restrictive Rules did not have explicit reference to distinctly Wesleyan standards, though Wesley’s *Sermons*, Fletcher’s *Checks to Antinomianism*, Adam Clarke’s *Commentary* (supplanting Wesley’s *Notes*), and eventually Richard Watson’s *Theological Institutes* became standard means of transmitting Methodist culture.

In the year after the MEC adopted its Constitution, the Evangelical Association was just emerging from the MEC as a separate denomination and published its first book of church organization and discipline, the *Doctrines of Faith and General Rules of Christian Church Discipline* (1809). Large portions of the work were translated from the MEC *Doctrines and Discipline*. The Evangelical Association’s *Doctrines of Faith and General Rules* contained a translation of the MEC General Rules and Articles of Religion, with a twenty-sixth Article added on the final judgment.¹¹ The next version (1817) of the *Doctrines of Faith and General Rules* included rituals for sacraments, marriages, funerals, and ordinations, following the pattern of the ritual in the MEC *Doctrines and Disciplines*.¹²

The first book of church organization of the United Brethren in Christ came six years later, in 1815. Despite the very different origins of the United Brethren from the German Reformed tradition (in the case of Otterbein), the early structures of the church bear remarkable parallels to

those of the Methodist Episcopal Church and to the Evangelical Association. In fact, the early books are called *Lehre und Zucht-Ordnung*, rendered in English the same as the MEC's title, *Doctrine and Discipline*.¹³ It included a Confession of Faith that was an expansion of the Apostles' Creed with added claims about the authority of scripture, justification by faith in Christ, the fall of humankind and redemption in Christ, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the optional practice of footwashing.¹⁴ The Confession of Faith thus paralleled the MEC Articles of Religion, just as a section on church members paralleled the MEC General Rules: open membership to all who seek salvation, worship regularly, engage in prayer, observe the Lord's Day as Sabbath, support the preachers, and attend class meetings.¹⁵ The book gave rituals for ordinations and weddings, though not for the Lord's Supper or funerals.¹⁶ By 1841, the United Brethren had added a Constitution to their *Lehre und Zucht-Ordnung*, parallel to that of the MEC, though it did not have anything parallel to the MEC Restrictive Rules, and in fact it specifically provided procedures by which UB General Conferences could alter the *Lehre und Zucht-Ordnung* and the Constitution itself.¹⁷

It is important to note at this point how small and simple these books of church order were in the early to mid-nineteenth century. In each case, they offered a succinct statement of basic doctrine, polity, and ritual in a very short compass, a small book on which there was very strong consensus.

Both the Evangelical Association and the United Brethren evolved through the later nineteenth century, with controversies over personal morality, sanctification, and biblical authority. Both groups underwent divisions grounded in divisions between newer German-speaking immigrants and the descendants of earlier immigrants, many of whom were speaking English by this time. By the late 1800s, these divisions had led to the separate organization of the United Brethren in Christ, Old Constitution, and the Evangelical Church of North America. Rank-and-file Evangelical and United Brethren members and leaders remained committed to traditional theology and strict personal morality, and yet could join these with a progressive, postmillennial outlook on social issues.¹⁸ The EUB union of 1946, originally utilized the doctrinal statements of both the Evangelical Church and the United Brethren in Christ, but a revised Confession of Faith undertaken by EUB bishops in the 1950s, attempted to reconcile these two confessional statements. In doing so, the EUB bishops adopted modern language and reflected some modern, ecumenical theological trends including the revision of teaching on the sacraments to allow for Zwinglian interpretation, then popular with both Evangelical as well as liberal Protestants.

Present Grounds of Unity in The UMC

If we compare the present grounds for unity in The United Methodist Church today to the early statements of Methodist, Evangelical, and United Brethren unity examined above, we find an immensely more complex and ambiguous situation that, I believe, lies at the heart of contemporary threats of division.

The Methodist union of 1939 had brought the MEC Constitution with its Restrictive Rules into the new denomination, and the United Methodist union of 1968 also utilized the Methodist Constitution as its basis, protecting the EUB Confession of Faith alongside the Methodist Articles of Religion and General Rules within the structure of the Restrictive Rules, and presupposing Methodist Church Judicial Council decisions that remained binding in the newly formed UMC. A proposal to reconcile the Methodist Articles of Religion with the EUB

Confession of Faith remanded to the Theological Study Commission 1968–1972 rejected the idea of reconciling these two statements, opting instead to craft a new contemporary statement, “Our Theological Task” that they understood to be a new theological statement that would be constitutionally protected and thus would require not only a two-thirds majority in the General Conference but also the consent of three-fourths of the voting members of UM annual conferences. The new statement was passed overwhelmingly by the 1972 General Conference, but in a surprise move not anticipated by members of the Commission, the Judicial Council determined that the statement of “Our Theological Task” was simple legislation and required only a majority of the General Conference and no ratification by annual conferences.¹⁹ This gave a secondary status to the statement of “Our Theological Task,” not protected by the provisions of the Restrictive Rules.

The effect of this decision was, as Bishop Scott J. Jones has pointed out, to leave The UMC with differing levels of disciplinary and doctrinal authority.²⁰ I maintain that this also affects the discussion of what stands as globally binding, *status confessionis* teachings and practices for The UMC today, and it makes for a complex and sometimes confusing conjunction of disciplinary and doctrinal criteria for unity. We end up with something like the following present levels or categories of disciplinary authority and unity:

1. The highest level or category defining unity is that of **the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith, protected by the first and second Restrictive Rules**, and alterable only by a two-thirds majority of the General Conference, subsequently ratified by a three-fourths majority of the voting members of all The UMC annual conferences.²¹
2. A second category is that of **other parts of the Constitution of The UMC and items protected by the other four Restrictive Rules**, including the General Rules (protected by the fifth Restrictive Rule); these can be altered only by a two-thirds majority of the General Conference, subsequently ratified by a two-thirds majority of the voting members of all The UMC annual conferences.
3. A third category is that of **items in the *Discipline* not protected by the Restrictive Rules and outside of the Constitution**. This category would include the Social Principles, the statement of “Our Theological Task,” chargeable offenses, and most of the remaining legislation in the *Discipline* with the exception noted in the next item. These items, sometimes described as “simple legislation,” require only a majority of the General Conference and no subsequent ratification to be altered.
4. A fourth level or category of disciplinary authority that includes **all the legislation in the *Discipline* that can be altered by Central Conferences** and is thus not globally binding on The UMC. The Constitution in the *Discipline* has allowed since 1939, that Central Conferences can make “changes and adaptations of the General *Discipline* as the conditions in their respective areas may require, subject to the powers that have been or shall be vested in the General Conference.”²² At this point, we have only the restriction of “powers that have been or shall be vested in the General Conference” and three Judicial Council decisions²³ to guide us in understanding the specifics of what in the *Discipline* is and is not alterable by Central Conferences.
5. The fifth category would be **items approved by the General Conference but not in the *Discipline***. Here I mean specifically resolutions that speak on behalf of the denomination. The General Conference votes as a whole on such items as *The United Methodist Hymnal* and the *Book of Worship*, though these are at least referred to in

the *Discipline* and so probably fall under my third or fourth categories rather than this one.

I'm building the case here that this set of varying levels of global (general-church) unity is problematically complex. But these are the formal, constitutional grounds for unity in The UMC, and any formal steps toward unity or division will have to deal with these bases of unity.

At the same time, most of us are aware of a powerful cultural movement, at least in the United States from the 1970s forward, which resists centralized authorities and even traditional voluntary organizations like civic clubs and sports leagues that once were much more visible and well organized parts of US life. One of the obvious casualties of this decentralist cultural move has been the deprecation of traditional denominations, seen most visibly in the removal of denominational tags, even from churches that continue to be part of traditional denominational structures.

In The United Methodist Church this has meant a trend toward what I would call the "congregationalization" of The UMC, with far less visible reference to the denomination's authorized structures, liturgies, and musical resources (the *Hymnal*), the starving of budgets of global-level UM boards and agencies, and a strong trend toward congregations offering their own mission and outreach programs with (in the USA) multiple 501(c)3 corporations as alternatives to general church programs, off the radar of denominational structures, including apportionments. The old strictures against retaining church property after separation from the denomination, specified in the trust clause, remain in place but no longer seem to have much of a practical effect. In each case I'm aware of, property has reverted to the annual conference, and then was sold back to the dividing congregation. With general boards and agencies stripped of funding and unable to offer the resources they offered in the past, I wonder if there's much left to fight for in what remains of the general structures of The UMC. These reflections are not about the formal structures for unity I have named above, but I think that they do reflect part of the problematic contemporary cultural context in which we have to discern unity today.

Framing the Contemporary Question

The issues that divide us today are not generic issues about "human sexuality"; they are specific issues expressed in three provisions in the *United Methodist Book of Discipline* specifically referring to homosexual practice, namely:

1. The statement added to the Social Principles in 1972, that, "The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching" (*Discipline* [2016], ¶161G, 113).
2. The statement added to the chapter on "The Ministry of the Ordained" between 1980 and 1984, that, "self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church" (*Discipline* [2016], ¶304.3, 226);²⁴ the related chargeable offense for clergy, "being a self-avowed, practicing homosexual" (*Discipline* [2016], ¶2702.1, 788); and other passages reaffirming this stance.
3. The statement added to the same chapter in 1996, that "Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches" (*Discipline* [2016], ¶341.6, p. 278) and the related chargeable offense for clergy, "conducting ceremonies which celebrate homosexual

unions; or performing same-sex wedding ceremonies” (*Discipline* [2016], ¶2702.1, p. 788).

To what extent do these three provisions make specific teachings and practices about homosexuality necessary to the global unity of The United Methodist Church? All of them fall in what I have described as the third or fourth levels of consensus or unity in the formal structures of The UMC.

With respect to the first of these three issues, the Social Principles speak on behalf of the entire denomination, and the *Discipline* explicitly states that the Social Principles are “not to be considered church law.”²⁵ Given the range of material in the Social Principles, it’s hard to envision that specific statements in them could be enforced as grounds for removing professing church members or clergy. For example, if a professing member of a UM congregation contradicted the Social Principles’ claim, “we believe that it is a governmental responsibility to provide all citizens with health care,”²⁶ could we imagine removing them from a congregation on the chargeable offense for professing members of, “dissemination of doctrines contrary to the established standards of doctrine of The United Methodist Church”?²⁷ I doubt it. Or could we imagine using that as a test for candidates for ordained ministry? Not with the claim that the Social Principles are “not to be considered church law.”

Could the second or third statements fall under the fourth category as material that might be revisable by Central Conferences and thus not globally binding on The UMC? The second statement, that “self-avowed and practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church,” would fall under the third category rather than the fourth because of a UM Judicial Council decision in 1969, that determined the Central Conferences could not alter “basic ministerial requirements” laid out in the general *Discipline* because ministerial qualifications should be a connectional concern.²⁸ Although I am not aware of *existing* Judicial Council decisions that would rule out Central Conferences altering restrictions on clergy performing sex-same marriages or unions or altering chargeable offenses, I suspect that if challenged, the Judicial Council would rule that these matters, too, are connectional and thus not amenable to alteration by Central Conferences. This raises again the major issue with which I am concerned in this paper, the question of whether our church has legislated altogether too much, and left altogether too little to the wisdom of local bodies or even individual conscience.

Three Problematic Ways Forward

Before we go there, let me describe what I see as the problems inherent in three ways forward that all strike me as sad possibilities. We are faced with stark decisions—and as I see it these are not only General Conference decisions—however it works out, sooner or later, every congregation, if not every person in our church, will face these issues. Here are the three bad ways forward I envision.

1. *Dysfunctional Unity*. That’s where we are now. None of us looks forward to thirty more years of arguing about the sexuality issues and letting ministries and missions suffer as we do so. Suppose one side or the other were to win? Would that resolve things forever? I doubt it. I suspect that at the next General Conference, the other side would come better organized and more strongly motivated, and might well rescind the actions of the previous General Conference. Meanwhile, missions and outreach suffer on all sides. Not a happy scenario.

2. *Regional Division*. One could envision scenarios for regional division at least within the USA. Imagine that as a result of the called General Conference of 2019, the Western, North Central, and Northeastern jurisdictions *all* decide to leave The UMC. The problem in each regional division scenario is that there would be local congregations *within* each of these regions who would want to be part of the other group. In fact, I can't envision any division scenario in which every congregation would not want the chance to make its own decision to identify with one or the other of these dividing groups. A regional division scenario can't work because, in fact, our divisions are *not* regional, they just involve different majority groups in each of the present jurisdictions. Not a happy scenario.

3. *A Two-Denomination Division over Homosexual Practice*. Perhaps the most frequently envisioned solution is simply to divide into two entirely separate denominations. This is really the Protestant default: you have a disagreement, you form separate denominations. It's a free country. And why just two? Why not a host of new non-United Methodist denominations? Rethink Church! The divisions of US-based Anglican, Presbyterian, and Lutheran denominations in recent years have followed just this pattern, with newly formed denominations scarcely different from each other except for the one great issue that divided them. Not a happy scenario, in my view. Could there be a better way, even a better way to divide?

A Proposed Way Forward: A Simpler Church

It's apparent to me, as I think it is to almost all who have followed these issues, that there will be no easy, straightforward ways forward. I will offer a proposal here grounded in our historical grounds of unity as I've recounted them above; if this sounds radical, I'm convinced there is no easy medicine, no magical pill available to us at this point. So I'm proposing radical surgery for The UMC.

Is it possible that we as United Methodists tried to be too much, to define too much, to legislate too much, especially in the middle of the twentieth century? I recall the 1972 structure for the organization of a local congregation that required all congregations, no matter how small, to have an Administrative Board, a Council on Ministries, and several other required committees and at least thirty-six officers. I know, because I had to fill out the forms for the little Center United Methodist Church in Smith County, Texas, and I appointed Mrs. Josephine Culpepper to be the chair of the Administrative Board and the chair of the Council on Ministries and the head of the United Methodist Women and the secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare and a whole lot of other fake titles required by the *Discipline*. And each of the other eleven elderly women in the Center congregation got a similar list of fake titles. Is that a parable for the way the Methodist and United Methodist churches functioned through the middle of the twentieth century? Where the General Conference functioned as a Supreme Soviet, telling all the local congregations what was best for them? Our church became ridiculously complicated, always chanting the magical word *connectionalism* as the grounds for our byzantine top-down structures. It became far too complicated, even for those of us who grew up in it and witnessed its transformations through the later twentieth century. The levels of disciplinary authority as grounds for unity laid out above seem to me to be a cardinal example of this unnecessary, haphazard, and dysfunctional way of structuring the church. And yet, I am not willing to see United Methodism become a congregational denomination. Time to Rethink Church, indeed!

So, click left—go back historically—and look at any book of *Doctrines and Discipline* from the Methodist Episcopal or Methodist Episcopal, South, or Methodist Protestant churches from

the nineteenth century, or look at any *Kirchenordnung* from the early decades of the Evangelical Association and the United Brethren in Christ, and you will see *a very small book*, and yet containing the entire ritual in addition to what we would call the Discipline from around 1800. These churches had no books of resolutions in addition to their Disciplines. These early Disciplines strike me as being far simpler, far less pretentious, far less globally dictatorial than we became in the middle of the twentieth century. And, I am quite sure, there was far more consensus on these little books than there is on our *Discipline, Hymnal, Book of Worship, and Book of Resolutions* (combined) today.

I ask, then, if we might envision a simpler UMC, more like our predecessor churches, with a strong core of common beliefs and practices and allowance for a wide range of practices not defined globally? For example—and this is a hastily conceived example—could you imagine living together in a church that defined at the global level something like the following?

- A **confession of common Christian teachings** drawn from our Confession of Faith and Articles of Religion, incorporating the wisdom of ancient Christian consensus including explicit inclusion of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, illuminated by the findings of Faith and Order work.
- A **confession of distinctively Wesleyan and Methodist teachings**—something we really do not have now—developed in conjunction with sister churches in the World Methodist Council.
- A **confession of globally binding social teachings and practices of personal morality and piety** on which there is strong consensus, drawn from the General Rules and United Brethren traditions, adapted to a contemporary global context, allowing latitude on many issues for annual conferences and local congregations.
- A statement of utterly necessary and globally binding elements of **church structure and ways of making decisions in the whole denomination**, insisting on a very high bar of consensus for all connectional (denomination-wide, global) structural matters, mandating (for example) a three-fourths vote of general conferences and the reception of these structures by at least a three-fourths vote of the delegates of annual conferences. I suggest further, that in this simplified structure we return to the earlier practice of having **only general conferences and annual conferences**, voting for bishops at general conferences, allowing for appropriate regional assemblies larger or smaller than annual conferences developed *ad hoc* and as necessary to address issues appropriate to those regions. There might be, for example, a United States regional assembly to deal with issues specific to the USA.
- A statement of utterly necessary and globally binding **requirements for a) professed church membership, b) consecration and ordination to various specific ministries of the church**, including the ordination of deacons and presbyter/elders and the consecration of bishops, and c) **chargeable offenses** that would lead to the removal of lay members from congregations and consecrated or ordained leaders from their ministerial roles, and procedures for removal from congregations or ministerial roles based on these chargeable offenses.
- In place of an explicit ritual and hymnal normative for the whole world, **a statement of what is utterly and globally necessary for the celebration of the sacraments, weddings, funerals, and ordinations** (specifying necessary language as globally appropriate), **and a collection of hymn texts** (but not tunes) reflecting a core of Charles Wesley poetry and historically utilized Methodist hymn texts in the public domain that

could be incorporated into regionally defined or congregationally published worship resources that would make ritual, tunes, and other resources more explicit.

Even with this simplified structure, however, the divisive issue of homosexual practice might remain. I really hesitate to say this, but at least I have already asked if division into entirely separate denominations is the only way we can imagine dealing with divisive issues as we face now. Given our present situation of division and the likelihood that there will be other critically divisive issues in the future as there have been in the past, might it be wise even in a simpler church structure to incorporate:

- A provision for temporary overlapping structures (I will call them “synods”) reflecting seriously divisive theological or moral issues on which the church cannot presently agree.²⁹ What I have in mind—and it is admittedly sketchy—is that we could agree as a temporary (temporal) provision that, given our disagreements over homosexuality at the global level, we would meet as two synods (like, Evangelical Synod of The UMC” and “Open Synod of The UMC”) in separate general conferences and annual conferences under each synod, looking forward to and actively working toward the time when greater wisdom would allow reunion of the synods or would in the last resort force a full and final separation of the synods into fully independent denominations.
- In the present context, such a proposal for temporarily separated synods might allow “enough ecclesiastical separation” (a phrase recently utilized by at least one conservative UM leader) for us all to carry on without being obsessed in our own synods with the divisive issues. It might allow specific shared ministries and even shared structures (like pension management or publishing agencies) to continue to function across the divided synods.
- But rather than making this provision only for the current division, I suggest making this general possibility part of the permanent structure of the church, thus allowing for ways to resolve future, similarly divisive conflicts while allowing us to pursue mission and ministries relatively unhindered. A principle would be that in any such conflicts, both divided groups have to become separate synods. And, if there arose seriously divisive issues at other levels (e.g., regional-level conflicts), a similarly provision might be made for temporarily separated regional structures.
- I would maintain from my perspective as a historian that this kind of separated, synodal structure might have been helpful at many points of Methodist divisions in the past and in the present and ongoing divisions of other Christian denominations today. In retrospect, it might have been a better way to relate the Evangelical United Brethren Church at least temporarily as a synod alongside the Methodist Church within the newly formed UMC in 1968, a way that might have allowed more of the culture of the EUB Church.
- We might even envision synods like this as a path toward reconciliation with other denominations presently separated from us, that is, we agree to move to the point where we and they function as overlapping synods working toward full, visible unity in a single denominational structure.

It would make sense, especially in the context of the large-scale simplification of the denomination that I envision and advocate, that such a provision might have very long-term benefits to our church and perhaps even model ways in which other Christian communities could overcome longstanding and visible disunity.

In any case, it's going to take some kind of strong medicine, if not radical surgery, to find a way forward for The UMC. Our heritage offers us some examples of how we might move forward. That's my best thought as to how we might find a way to function together, short of a full-scale denominational division. I conclude with the same prayer with which I began: May Christ have mercy on us, and give the church peace and edification in our time.

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- ¹ My translation from the Greek text in Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeks and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, 3 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 1:162–63; cf. WCC Faith and Order Commission, *Confessing the One Faith*, Faith and Order Paper no. 153 (Geneva: WCC Press, 1991), 11–12. The received form of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (with the *filioque* clause) appears in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 880. I note here that in ecumenical discussion and consensus, the creeds do not hold authority simply because they were promulgated by councils of bishops: of the hundreds of councils of bishops that met in the early Christian centuries, the teachings and practices of only a very few councils, such as the first council of Nicaea, were *received* in the churches as necessary for the unity of Christian communities; cf. William G. Rusch, *Reception: An Ecumenical Problem* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press in cooperation with the Lutheran World Federation, 1988).
- ² In John Leith, ed., *Creeks of the Churches* 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1982), 517–22. I object to the often-repeated translation of *status confessionis* as “status of a confessor,” as if this applied principally to individual professions of faith. In the context in which the term developed, the Lutheran controversies over unity in the sixteenth century, it had reference to a teaching that has the “status of a confession” of the faith, and that is indeed the most straightforward translation of the Latin phrase; cf. Daniel Patte, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), s.v. “*Status Confessionis*,” 1192.
- ³ John [and Charles] Wesley [Charles's name was added in later editions], “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies,” ¶ 4, in Rupert E. Davies, ed., *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design*, vol. 9, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley [Works]* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 70; on the openness of the Wesleys and other early Methodists to non-Anglican participants, cf. John Walsh, “Methodism and the Origins of English-Speaking Evangelicalism,” in Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk, eds., *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700–1990* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 28.
- ⁴ For example, in the provisions of the third section of the General Rules mandating Methodist participation in typical Anglican church structures involving Sunday services.
- ⁵ Cited in Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 327.
- ⁶ “Large Minutes,” following the versions of 1770 and 1772, as given in Henry D. Rack, ed., *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of Conference*, vol. 10, *Works* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 875.
- ⁷ A model deed of 1784 given in Thomas Edward Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 300.
- ⁸ For example, in a letter to Matthew Lowes dated September 8, 1761, John Wesley stated, “If local preachers who differ from us will keep their opinions to themselves, then they may preach in our societies; otherwise they must not. And upon this condition we are all willing to receive William Darney into connexion with us”; in John Wesley, *Letters*, ed. Ted A. Campbell, *Works*, 27:274. Darney was a Scots preacher who espoused predestinarian views. The Wesleyan conference allowed him to preach on the condition that he not speak on predestination or any other “controversial” topic. Darney was eventually dismissed from the Wesleyan connection for failing to keep this condition.
- ⁹ E. Dale Dunlap, “Methodist Theology in Great Britain in the Nineteenth Century: With Special Reference to the Theology of Adam Clarke, Richard Watson, and William Burt Pope” (PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 1956; reprint edition: Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International), 104–8; Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*, 2 vols., rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 1:49–50.
- ¹⁰ Given in Frederick A. Norwood, “The Church Takes Shape,” in *The History of American Methodism*, ed. Emory S. Bucke, 3 vols. (New York & Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964), 1:478–79.
- ¹¹ Described in Ammon Stapleton, *Annals of the Evangelical Association of North America and History of the United Evangelical Church* (Harrisburg, PA: Publishing House of the United Evangelical Church, 1900), 168; J.

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- Bruce Behney and Paul H. Eller, *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church* (Nashville: Abingdon press, 1979), 145.
- ¹² Behney and Eller, *History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church*, 145.
- ¹³ I have reference here to the 1819 edition of the United Brethren *Lehre und Zucht-Ordnung* (Hagerstown, MD: Gruber and May).
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, §1, pp. 18–21.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, §8, pp. 48–55.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, in an appendix, 60–77.
- ¹⁷ Behney and Eller, *History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church*, 128–30.
- ¹⁸ An example was the Evangelical theologian Solomon Jacob Gamertsfelder, whose 1913 *Systematic Theology* defended biblical inerrancy in matters of scientific and historical fact as well as Christian doctrine, which might mark him as a Fundamentalist: Gamertsfelder, *Systematic Theology* (Cleveland, OH: C. Hauser, 1913), 115–19. But Gamertsfelder also rejected the premillennial outlook so definitive of the Fundamentalist movement in his age, arguing for a socially progressive postmillennial vision (567–73).
- ¹⁹ Albert C. Outler personally described to me the surprise of the Theological Study Commission at the Judicial Council ruling that the new doctrinal statement on Our Theological Task was to be regarded as simple legislation, and not an alteration of the first Restrictive Rule.
- ²⁰ Scott J. Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 39–59.
- ²¹ The provisions for altering items in the Constitution (including items protected by the Restrictive Rules) are given in the “Constitution: Division 5—Amendments,” *The Book of Discipline* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶ 59, p. 43.
- ²² “Constitution: Division 2,” *Discipline*, (2016) ¶31.5, p. 34.
- ²³ The UMC Judicial Council decisions 142, 147, and 313 (see <http://www.umc.org/decisions/search>).
- ²⁴ See also *Discipline* (2016), ¶310.2d, n. 3, pp. 232–33.
- ²⁵ Preface to the Social Principles preceding ¶160, *Discipline* (2016), p. 105; see Judicial Council decisions 833 and 1254 that led to the addition of this phrase in the Social Principles.
- ²⁶ *Discipline* (2016), ¶162V, p. 130.
- ²⁷ *Discipline* (2016), ¶2702.3, p. 789.
- ²⁸ Judicial Council decision 313 (1958).
- ²⁹ Here I’m utilizing the term *synod* parallel to Lutheran usage of “Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod” and Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, though in these Lutheran cases, the synods are fully separated denominations.