

The Atlantic

The Divided Methodist Church

The Christian denomination is considering schism, largely over LGBT issues. The fight shows the difficulty of trying to create a global church.



Delegates vote during the General Conference of the United Methodist Church in Portland on Tuesday

Don Ryan / AP

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Methodists from around the world are in Portland this week for their General Conference, a big meeting about church teachings and laws that happens every four years. This year, at least, the delegates aren't focused on bureaucratic minutiae. They are considering whether gay and lesbian pastors should be

ordained, and whether same-sex couples should be able to be married in the church. Depending on what they eventually choose, they may effectively decide whether the denomination should schism.

The Methodists are not the first to face this existential challenge. LGBT issues have caused heartache among [Catholics](#) and [Muslims](#) and [Mennonites](#); they've prompted Jews to [reflect on their theology](#) and Southern Baptists to [dig in on theirs](#). But unlike Catholics, who are bound to follow the teachings of the hierarchy, or Southern Baptists, who are categorically opposed to homosexuality, Methodists have to find coherence within a global, democratic church that embraces a vast range of positions. The denomination's Book of Discipline, its set of guidelines and teachings, says "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching," and many churches agree with that position. Pastors are not supposed to be gay, and clergy who perform gay weddings can be tried by the Church for their actions.* Despite these possible consequences, a number of pastors have started rebelling against this teaching in recent years, [officiating same-sex marriage ceremonies](#) or [coming out](#) as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

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In some ways, the Methodists' problem is one of their own making: The American church has sent missionaries all over the world to spread the faith. Over time, communities abroad have become consistent voices in support of "traditional" heterosexuality, while their progressive peers in the United States have gradually shifted to support gay marriage and pastors. In a denomination that's remarkably accommodating to local cultural practices, homosexuality might represent the outer limit of tolerable difference.

People sometimes complain about making "decisions by committee," seeing consensus as the enemy of clarity. Just imagine what it's like to make decisions by a committee of 850 delegates who come from places as diverse as Africa, Texas,

Portland, and the Philippines. Bishops do lead the denomination, but as Boston University professor Dana Robert wrote in an email, “the bishops are not actually able to act independently on these kinds of issues without explicit permission from the General Conference, which is the highest authority in the church.” The United Methodist Church is a “big democracy,” she said—“we don’t have a pope like the Catholics.”

But this week, the Conference asked the bishops to take an unusual leadership role—to guide the denomination through discussions of its policies on LGBT weddings and pastors. Bruce Ough, the president of the Council of Bishops, said during the meeting Wednesday that it was the first time, to his knowledge, such an extensive ask has been made, which speaks to both the seriousness and desperation of the situation.

Early in the week, rumors of schism spread. A small group of bishops, including Ough, reportedly got together to discuss the possibility of splitting the denomination into three parts, [according to *The Washington Post*](#): conservative, moderate, and progressive. But leaders pushed back on the idea of breaking apart, and on Wednesday, Ough recommended that the Conference “defer all votes on human sexuality,” instead forming a commission to review and possibly revise the denomination’s policies on sexuality. “We continue to hear from many people on the debate over sexuality that our current discipline contains language that is contradictory, unnecessarily hurtful, and inadequate for a variety of local, regional, and global contexts,” he said. The body of delegates accepted these recommendations. Based on the findings, the denomination may or may not convene on this issue again before the next General Conference in 2020.

This doesn’t mean the way forward is clear, though. “I don’t even want to think about two to four more years of divisiveness, distrust, confusion, living in tension, demonstrations, acts of disobedience,” said one delegate during discussion on Wednesday after the initial announcement. “We’re here, and we were elected to come here and do something in 2016,” said another. Later, a young man stood up. “Quit being afraid to stand for what you believe in,” he said. “This is what the

gospel teaches.”

Those churches that have decided to fully welcome LGBT members will also have to continue in uncertainty. First United Methodist Church in Portland, for example, was one of the first congregations to take a stand on this issue, said the senior pastor, Donna Pritchard. But when asked whether her church performs same-sex wedding ceremonies, she paused, then said, “I don’t think I should answer that. Our commitment is to provide ministry to all persons, but I do not desire, nor does my church desire, the experience of being drug through a trial.”

“Why fight for the next 20 years? How does that honor Christ?”

Even though the denomination is punting on the question, it seems likely there will be conflict to come. There have been “disruptive demonstrations” in protest of the denomination’s position on homosexuality “every four years for as long as I can remember,” said Robert Renfroe—a self-described evangelical UMC pastor of a 12,000-member church in the Woodlands, Texas, who is at the meeting in Portland. In his view, positions on homosexuality within the Church can be summarized in three ways.

“One is that, eventually, say over the next 20 years, [traditional] views will become so solidified and so widely supported that those who want to change them will give up,” he said. That possibility relies on demographic changes within the denomination, and particularly the growth of the Church in Africa.

“Those on the other side, the progressives, think that eventually they will win. Culture is changing, old people are dying off,” he said. “If they can hold the church together long enough, [they think,] then we will see the light.”

He holds a different position. Although he supports traditional marriage, “I and others say, ‘Why fight for the next 20 years? How does that honor Christ?’” he said. “We’re in a cage match, and we can’t escape each other, and we can’t quit fighting.”

He thinks members of the denomination should figure out “a way to bless each other and, with respect and civility, go our own way.”

A lot of people don't feel this way; during discussion at the Conference on Wednesday, many people urged the denomination toward unity. In some ways, this is in the DNA of the denomination. Its founder, John Wesley, “hated the idea of schism,” said Tom Frank, a professor at Wake Forest University who studies Methodism and is part of the denomination.

Wesley “was a huge advocate for differentiating essential and non-essential teachings,” he said. This included things like different modes of baptism, which can include everything from full immersion to sprinkling water on an infant's head in the UMC. In fact, Wesley was never out to create his own denomination—he was a clergyman in the Church of England, and his followers only created a new denomination in the newly formed United States. Wesley's “biggest fear was that Methodism would be a ‘dead sect’—almost exactly the pickle we're in now,” Frank said. “Everyone goes to their separate camps. This is exactly what he hated most.”

But a lot has changed since Wesley's time. Methodism dates back to the 18th century, and now claims some 80 million adherents around the world. The current United Methodist Church itself is less than 50 years old, formed in America in the late '60s with the merging of two church bodies. It's the largest mainline Protestant denomination in America, with over 7 million members in the United States, and more than 4 million elsewhere around the globe. Many current affiliates of the United Methodist Church in other countries were planted by missionaries before the denomination took on its current form, said Robert. These churches, she said, are now led by locals, and who have made a home for the faith in its different cultural settings.

“The reason this is messy is because there's a deep moral obligation to be one.”

But doing so has sometimes required sacrifice. “To become a Christian, people in

African were making decisions to take on traditional family structures” she said. “So they were already putting a lot on the line.” This is one reason why people from these places tend to be firmly opposed to changing the Church’s position on sexuality: They have already shifted their lives to accommodate their relatively newfound faith.

Then, “starting in the 1980s, the actions to include annual conferences from other nations began to accelerate,” said Frank. “Some of it has been [driven by] a genuinely grand, global vision: Wouldn’t it be amazing to have a truly global church?” he added. “But there’s been very little work to understand how to make this work.”

That’s the setting for this week’s fight in Portland. Although it may look like a mirror of the American culture wars, the conflict actually comes from a much deeper question: How much difference can a global church accommodate and still stay together?

It’s messy, Robert said. But “Jesus told his disciples to be one. The reason this is messy is because there’s a deep moral obligation to be one.”

So the denomination will likely move forward, suspended in a state of conflict and ambiguity, for at least four more years. For her part, Robert thinks this is good news. “You don’t see Catholic bishops debating these issues with the laity. Their position is set. You don’t see fundamentalists debating this issue with the laity. Their position is set,” she said. But for Methodists, if “you believe in the unity of the church ... struggle is part of the process.”

** This article originally stated that pastors can be tried by the United Methodist Church for ordaining gay ministers.*

However, these clergy are ordained by bishops. While some pastors have come out following ordination and have faced trials, clergy have not been tried for the ordinations themselves. We regret the error.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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