

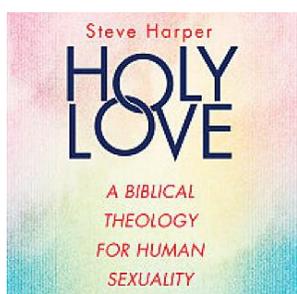
PARTING WORDS & WORDS OF WITNESS

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Disclaimer: the use of the terms “conservative/traditional” and “progressive/liberal” in this article are used in a purely religious context, not political.

It can be true that political leanings do not always match the same religious leanings.

On May 1st, the Global Methodist Church will officially begin, and some congregations will disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church, the first wave of a separation process that will take years to complete. I will not be going with them, and as the GMC day of departure draws near, I am pondering all the reasons why I will remain in the UMC. I offer the following thoughts as parting words to those who will disaffiliate, and also as words of witness to those who will stay.



I do not say “goodbye” apart from a deep sadness. I still believe that unity is a higher biblical value than division. We will, of course, continue to disagree about which new skin has the “best wine”—division does not bring that debate to an end—but from the vantage point of sociology, it is time to go our separate ways.

But I do not say “goodbye” without forgetting that until I was 66 years old (Lent of 2014), I lived and worked in the part of the UMC that is soon to become the GMC. My time included leadership in Good News and the Confessing Movement, as well as teaching & administration at Asbury Theological Seminary—the seminary now most-aligned with the WCA/GMC split. I did all this in the context often described as “welcoming but not affirming”—that is, thinking I was being as relational and charitable with LGBTQ+ people as the Gospel would allow. I now understand that the “welcoming but not affirming” position is harmful, along with other non-affirming stances.

“Good News” and the “Confessing Movement” are both unofficial United Methodist lobby organizations who are explicitly anti-gay. Asbury Theological Seminary is an independent seminary, theologically conservative, and not officially recognized by the denomination. The Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA) is the predecessor “movement” body that is becoming their own denomination: Global Methodist Church.

I lived this way willingly. I trusted those who taught me this non-affirming way of thinking. They taught me many good things about Christianity; why would their beliefs about human sexuality not be good, too? I accepted what I was taught (and went on to teach it myself), not taking the time to do my own homework, and to think for myself, until 2014. When I did, I quickly discovered that this put me “outside the camp” in short order.

Where I now stand comes from the mixture of having been a conservative “insider” for so long (steeped in its scholarship and ecclesiology) and the ensuing 8 years on another path. This journey is full of details, points and sub-points, many of which I have previously written about. In other words, my decision to remain in the UMC is an informed one, a decision that advances on several key components.

First, I have learned that progressive theology in general and with respect to human sexuality, in particular, is as substantive, scholarly, and as plausible as conservative theology. I have learned that progressives believe in the inspiration and authority of Scripture as much as any conservative does. Our differences are about interpretation, not how the Bible was inspired. For those of you reading this as longstanding progressives, you may say “tell us something we don't know.” But living for 6 decades within conservative Christianity, you must believe me when I say this was a transforming discovery. Conservatives simply assumed progressive thinking was lazy, emotion-driven, and simple-minded.

With conservative Christianity's “one-stop shopping” disposition, I was not encouraged to explore liberalism—mostly with a “no need to do so” attitude (benign neglect), but also with an occasional “if you do so, you will be on a slippery slope” warning that alleged I would be descending into “Christianity lite,” unorthodoxy, and perhaps even heresy. It took firsthand experience to see this is not so.

My parting word to GMC folks is that I have learned progressive theology is as credible as conservative theology.

My witness to those who will stay in the UMC is that you will remain in a denomination that is biblical. You do not have to join the GMC to be faithful to Scripture.

Second, I have discovered that LGBTQ+ people live as committed Christians and devoted disciples of Jesus as much as conservatives do. They do so on the same basis as any Christian—fidelity to the covenant. And they do so made in the image of God as much as anyone on the nonbinary spectrum of humanity.

Additionally, I have seen them live their faith as ignored, demeaned, and persecuted people, and do so with a depth of commitment greater than I have had to live it in a heteronormative environment. By expanding my understanding of humanity through the witness and friendship of LGBTQ+ people, my experience of God has been deepened and widened beyond what it once was.

My parting word to GMC folks is that in beginning a new denomination that continues a non-affirming theology of human sexuality, which then prohibits full access by LGBTQ+ persons to the church's ministries (ceremonies and callings) you are providing a seedbed where other divisive, regulatory, and exclusionary seeds can grow, as they have done in other split-off denominations.

My witness to those who will remain in the UMC is that you have not compromised or diminished your faith by commending acceptance, inclusion, and the common good. You have, in fact, decided to personify Micah's exhortation to “do justice” (Micah 6:8), and doing so in ways that a “pure church” mentality does not do.

Third, I have chosen to remain in the UMC because the two previous points (along with others) produce a theology of love that's deeper and wider than the stated intentions of the GMC. Of course, GMC folks will disagree with me on this (as they do also on the two previous points), but I believe the potential for a theology of love is wider in the future UMC. And because a theology of love is at the heart of Wesleyan theology, I must remain where it is practiced to the greatest extent.

The writing of Thomas Oord is shining bright light on a theology of love. I am reading his latest book, *Pluriform Love* with great benefit, helping me to see that the focus of John and Charles Wesley on love was an “openness theology” in the sense the United Methodist Church affirms and teaches it.

My parting word to GMC folks is to judge the new denomination “by its fruits”—the heart of which is love, and see how it defines and practices love in actuality. Pay attention to who is affirmed and not affirmed, who is welcomed and who is turned away, and who is given “in” status versus who is “out.” Notice how this happens, and why.

My witness to those who will remain in the UMC is that you can be confident that you are staying in a denomination committed to love in an “all means all” fashion (Colossians 3:11). You will be in a denomination that sees its mission to remove walls that divide (in the spirit of Ephesians 2:14) so that Galatians 3:28 can be realized.

My decision to remain in the UMC does not ignore the fact that the future UMC has challenging work to do. Some have already given up and gone to denominations where progressive theology is more fully lived. Like John Wesley, I confess that I have drawn a picture that I/we have not attained, but it is a vision to live into once the GMC is gone on to do their own thing. We will not ultimately be judged by the GMC’s leaving, but by what we become once they leave.

In sum, my parting word to the GMC is “goodbye” because it does not offer anything I have failed to find in the UMC. If you believe otherwise . . . then go.

In sum, my witness to those who will remain in the UMC is this: if you want to be in a denomination where biblical authority, a credible theology of human sexuality, and a commitment to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself is in full force—you need not leave.

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~~~**Helpful insight:** Approximately 800 delegates from around the world are elected by their Annual Conferences to serve as delegates on a global body known as the General Conference. General Conference meets every 4 years. This is the only body that speaks on behalf of the entire denomination. This group of people—50% clergy/50% lay people—can make changes to our stances and policies within our *Book of Discipline* and *Book of Resolutions*. The most recent General Conference was convened in 2016 (Portland, OR), and then a special-called General Conference was held in February 2019 (St. Louis, MO) to address growing concerns around LGBTQ+ inclusion. The 2019 General Conference furthered tension and division within the denomination. The Wesleyan Covenant Association was formed by conservatives who wished to leave and form a new entity. The formation of their denomination will begin May 1<sup>st</sup> and will be called The Global Methodist Church. Meanwhile, the 2020 General Conference (Minneapolis, MN) has been further delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic until 2024.

~~~**Further Helpful Insight:** A big issue revolves around \$\$\$ and property. In the United Methodist Church, all local property is held “in trust” to the denomination. Meaning, as long as a local church declares themselves United Methodist, they have full ownership of their property. When a church closes and dissolves, and the property is abandoned, the property (including all assets) automatically transfers to the Annual Conference. People hear stories of an Annual Conference “seizing the property” of a local church. This has never been true, except in cases of church closure. And even in those cases, the local church has first choice on what happens to the property. When a church declares themselves no longer United Methodist, the Annual Conference has a legal right to either (1) take possession of the property or (2) require the local church to pay to retain the property. When this gets taken to court, huge \$\$\$ is spent and ministries in both the local church and Annual Conference lose out. As it stands in our *Book of Discipline*, leaving the denomination requires certain financial obligations before departure is granted legally (which each Annual Conference can vote to expand upon the terms): (a) payment of past due and current apportionments, (b) payment of future apportionment up to 1 or 2 years, (c) paying a certain % into the clergy pension fund, and (d) purchasing of property.

It is important to understand that the “Trust Clause” is nothing new. It was started by none other than Rev. John Wesley himself. After the meetinghouse in Bristol, England refused to accept a traveling minister he appointed, Wesley had to make sure every future meetinghouse built included the Trust Clause. The Trust Clause is a legal way for the itineracy system (appointment of pastors to churches) to function. It is like a legal binding of the Connexion. When churches are built today, the Trust Clause is discussed and explained. No United Methodist Church is exempt, and the Trust Clause does not have to be written explicitly into property deed for it to be in effect. Accepting United Methodist pastors and naming ourselves United Methodist puts that Clause into effect. It is most certainly true that the builders of our local church in Port Edwards knew about this. It only comes as a surprise to those who have not dealt with church construction or renovation in their lifetime.

The money required for leaving is to ensure that ministries at the Annual Conference level are not compromised overnight but are sustained until further action can be sought. The assets (camps, agencies, nursing homes, hospitals, children’s homes, family services, etc., etc.) all suffer when churches leave or close. Fewer churches cannot support the same assets that have been built up over the decades, and the people who use these ministries lose out. Most importantly, United Methodist churches and Annual Conferences in Africa will lose out significantly. African churches require heavy financial help from the United States. If the church splits, the United Methodists in Africa will face significant hurt.

~~~~**Further, Further Helpful Insight:** What is currently happening is not a split-down-the-middle. The denomination is not splitting in half. A relatively small portion of our denomination will be leaving. There are 4 categories of United Methodists: Progressive-Incompatible, Progressive-Compatible, Conservative-Compatible, Conservative-Incompatible. “Compatible” refers to those more in the middle (“centrist”) who do not mind a “big tent” Church where decisions based on inclusion or exclusion is made on the local level or Annual Conference levels. In other words, they can live in a state of tolerance. “Incompatible” is the “my-way-or-the-highway” or “all-or-nothing” mindset. They do not want to be in a denomination where others disagree. For conservatives, it’s a matter of holiness; for progressives, it’s a matter of justice. Centrists (“Compatibles”) make up ~75-80% of all United Methodists. Some Progressives were planning to form a new denomination called the Liberation United Methodist Church; agitated by the slow forward motion within our current institutional stalemate. In 2021, their plans were abandoned. About 10-15% are traditional-incompatibilists. They are the ones behind the creation of the Global Methodist Church. The number of members and churches leaving will not be the same in every region. Some regions will be hit harder; others will see a few leave. The big question that is currently trying to be answered is: what if an entire Annual Conference wants to leave? Do all churches, regardless of local preference, go with them? And what happens if a local church is now in a geographical region that is opposed to them?

Rest assured, the Wisconsin Annual Conference and Port Edwards United Methodist Church are not leaving, and our local and state ministries will be impacted *minimally*. But—only time will tell. Keep praying!