

A Way Forward, Homosexuality and the Church

By John Barnes

A Special Session of General Conference will meet in St. Louis from Sunday February 24 through Tuesday, February 26. The purpose of the conference will be to vote on a way to stay together as a denomination while differing on our understanding of the relationship between, homosexuality, same gender marriage, openly LGBTQ clergy and Christianity.

How we got here (copied and adapted from a previous FFUMC handout)

In 1968 the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church united and took the name The United Methodist Church. In 1972 the United Methodist Church added language to the *Book of Discipline* that homosexuality was incompatible with Christian teaching. That was the first mention of homosexuality in the *Discipline*. We have clashed about it at every General Conference since, but voted to keep that language each time. The official policy of the UMC is that homosexuals are people of sacred worth, but homosexual acts are sinful. A person cannot be ordained as United Methodist clergy if they are a practicing homosexual. United Methodist clergy cannot perform same-sex marriages and churches cannot host same-sex weddings.

More recently some Annual Conferences, Boards of Ordained Ministry, churches and clergy have voted publicly not to abide by that policy. As a way of dealing with this division the 2016 General Conference approved a Commission on a Way Forward to bring a proposal to the Council of Bishops that would allow the church to stay together in the face of very different views on LGBTQ issues.

Where we are

That commission spent two years listening, praying and discerning what to do and has presented the Bishops with three plans. Two plans were fully explained and developed (the One Church plan and the Connectional Church plan) for legislation, one was not (the Traditional Plan). The Council of Bishops endorsed the One Church plan and they will present it to be discussed and voted on at the Special Called General Conference in February 2019 in St. Louis. Other plans and amendments to the proposed plans will also be considered.

What the Bible says about homosexuality and same gender marriage

As a way of helping you understand why people disagree over this issue I would like to share two links that have two very different understandings of what the Bible and the church teach or should teach about human sexuality. One link is written by the Bishops of the Catholic Church as a guide to pastoral care. This document also gives reasons from scripture and church tradition for the understanding that homosexuality and same gender marriage are not God's intended will. The other link gives reasons why homosexuality and same gender marriage should be embraced as Christian.

One reason for including these very different arguments is to help you understand why people come to different conclusions about the issue. The hope is that we will gain respect for the thoughtfulness and reasonableness of those with whom we disagree. Another reason is that we often never read the arguments of those with whom we disagree.

<http://www.matthewvines.com/transcript/>

<http://www.usccb.org/about/doctrine/publications/homosexual-inclination-guidelines-general-principles.cfm>

How should we respond if we do not agree with what is decided

I don't know what will happen at the Special Session of General Conference. I don't know how people in our congregation will respond to what will happen. There will be people who will disagree with whatever is done. At that point we will have to ask for guidance from the Holy Spirit for ourselves and for our congregation so that we may respond in a Christian manner. Guided by the Holy Spirit we must follow our conscience, but we must also continue showing love and grace to those with whom we disagree. One way we can continue showing love and grace is by understanding how people come sincerely to different opinions. I hope you will read the links above.

Again, I will ask that you pray for our staff, church, conference and denomination. And remember also that God is ultimately in control.