

Research Paper

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Abstract

There is a famous quote by Heraclius that says, “The only constant in life is change.” Some changes occur swiftly and then there are those, which take some time to occur. There are also varieties of questions, which can surface such as what the impetus of the change, who will be impacted by the change, and what is the proposed or desired result of the change being implemented. As the United Methodist Church (UMC) strives to address the LGBTQ topic, there looms the propensity of internal ministerial and membership impact at the outcome of their decision. There also exists the probability of a ripple effect across Methodism. The focus of this discussion will center on the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denominational decision in response to what is taking place within UMC at this time.

Outline

- i. Introduction**
- ii. Origination of Methodism**
- iii. United Methodist Church (UMC) on a world-wide platform**
- iv. African Methodist Episcopal Churches (AME) - historical to current framework**
- v. Changes in societal norms and acceptance of LGBTQ community**
- vi. Internal Religious Pressures within (UMC)**
- vii. Potential Considerations by AME**
- viii. Possible Futuristic Outlook of Methodism**
- ix. Conclusion**

Introduction

Throughout history, religious institutions have faced various challenges as well as decisions to be made. Some matters were quickly resolved and then there were those that took a longer period. Often the impetus for strategic discussions and motivation towards a course of action was the result of the potential implications of making or not making a decision. The matter of addressing the LGBTQ topic within the Methodist denomination but more specifically by the United Methodist Church (UMC) is an ideal example of current challenges and possible decisions to be made.

In May of this year, there is expected to be a vote on a proposal. The proposal has established on December 17, 2019. It was signed by 16 UMC church leaders from around the world.¹ It contains the framework to grant traditionalism on the topic of LGBTQ to separate from the United Methodist Church. This will then allow those that remain within the existing United Methodist Church to repeal the ban on same-sex marriages. Someone might ask, why is this so significant?

The significance of the vote's outcome is not only what the terms will be but also the magnitude of the impact. After the Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention, the United Methodist Church is the third largest denomination in the United States. The UMC also holds the distinction of being the second largest Protestant denomination in the US.² It presently has more than 12 million members worldwide including the US, Africa, Europe and the

1. Meg Anderson, *United Methodist Church Announces Proposal*, 1

2. Meg Anderson, *United Methodist Church Announces Proposal*, 1

Philippines. The ripple effect whether to affirm or decline the proposal can produce a cascading effect. As we embark on this subject matter, let us take a look at the history of Methodism before we traverse through some of the religious, as well as societal factors in this matter.

A commitment to “not remove the old landmark” or to institute a modification to doctrinal discipline as to the LGBTQ topic, is a pivotal UMC consideration with potential impact on other denominations.

Origination of Methodism

When the Church of England was at a crossroad of contention between church and state rule, within the shadows of conflict between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, the birth environment for Methodism in Oxford, England in 1729 was formulated.³ A group of devoted students united to pray and commit their lives to piety and being useful in the service of God. There arose five individuals who would be considered instrumental in the formulation of the Methodist church. They are John Wesley, Charles Wesley, Mr. Morgan Mr. Kirkham and Mr. George Whitefield. The name, Methodist was attributed to the fellowship of this group called the Holy Club, by fellow classmates because of the rule and method that directed their decisions.⁴

As Methodism expanded and its congregations grew, the gulf enlarged between the Church of England and the Wesleys along theological and doctrinal lines. John Wesley sought

3. James McGee. *The March of Methodism from Epworth Around the Globe*: Delaware: Leopold Classic Library, 13.

4. James McGee. *The March of Methodism*, 15

to establish the foundations of Methodism on key components of eradication of inbred sin, entire sanctification and holy living.⁵ Early Methodist revivals promoted salvation by faith, returning to church and following the Bible. The revivals transformed England in the 1700's. The Welch Revival of 1904 – 1905 was also instrumental in the spread and growth of Methodism. It has been often noted by religious scholars that “American Pentecostalism is founded in the Wesleyan tradition which derived from Methodism. The most important link between Pentecostalism and historical expressions of Protestantism is through Methodism.”⁶ Methodism would expand over times and would have tremendous membership growth in the United States and on a global front. One of its largest groups would be the United Methodist Church.

United Methodist Church (UMC) on a world-wide platform

It is important to look at the historical framework of the United Methodist Church to seek to understand what has transpired to impact or affect this present environment. Because of the spread of Methodism from England to such areas as the United States, particular church developments occurred. The Methodist Episcopal Church was formulated in 1784.

As time progressed and differences in views on particular church matters occurred, a group separated and the Methodist Protestant Church was established in 1830.⁷

External issues such as the issue of slavery influenced the internal operations and cohesiveness of membership and leadership as well. It was in 1844 that another split occurred

5. Tennent, Timothy. *Theology in the context of World Christianity*. Michigan: Zondervan, 2007, 175.

6. Tennent, Timothy. *Theology in the context of World Christianity*. Michigan: Zondervan, 2007, 174.

7. *History of the United Methodist Church*, 1

and produced division between the North and South Methodist Episcopal Church areas. This divided status continued for over ninety years until a compromise with terms as to the subject of race was crafted in 1939.

It was in 1946, that the Evangelical United Brethren Church was formed. This church was actually the product of The Church of the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical Church coming together. These were both US established denominations in origin. It was recognized that there were noted similarities between the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church as it related to polity and evangelism. It was approximately twenty-two years later in 1968 that the United Methodist Church was formed from the connection between the Evangelical United Brethren and the Methodist Church. There are presently over 12 million members in 42,000 congregations worldwide, consisting of five jurisdictions in the United States with 54 annual conferences, supervised by bishops in 46 episcopal areas. There are 75 annual conferences between Africa, Europe and the Philippines, which are supported by 20 bishops.⁸

African Methodist Episcopal Churches (AME) - historical to current framework

Within these years of the progression and formulization of the United Methodist Church, there was the establishment of other Methodist organizations. One of these was the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). It was predominantly the result of overt racism and the treatment of the black membership in the late 18th Century which caused the need for AME churches.⁹ It was in 1787 in response to racial discrimination by white Methodist leadership and

8. Annual Conference, 2

9. The Origins of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1

congregants that Rev. Richard Allen and Rev. Absalom Jones withdrew from the Methodist Episcopal Church. They formulated and founded the Free American Society. It was in 1816 when it formally organized as the African Methodist Episcopal Church with Richard Allen as the first Bishop in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church is a predominantly African American Methodist denomination based in the United States but has also expanded globally. It has 2.5 million in its membership and is still considered around the world as one of the largest Methodist denominations.¹⁰

Changes in societal norms and interjection of the LGBTQ community

We are presently in modernized period both where LGBTQ issues are more readily, and openly discussed. This was not always the case or the context within which conversation and interaction of this matter would ensue. It was often treated as a taboo topic of conversation and without likely probability of receiving or being given positive attention. Private discussion and limited personal declaration on this topic were more the norm than the aberration years ago. The word homophile instead of homosexual was preferred by activists and those who sought for it to affirm gender attraction versus sexual proclivity.¹¹

To give focus to women in particular, the term “lesbian” grew in popularity to be utilized. Lesbianism is defined as women that feel sexual attraction to other women.¹² A lesbian marriage is one between two women. Within the timeframe of the expansion of the Women’s Movement in the mid to latter part of the 20th Century, there was heightened articulation of the voice of

10. Jack Zavada, *AME Church History*, 2

11. Jeffry Iovannone. *A Brief History of the LGBTQ Initialism*, 1

12. Jeffry Iovannone. *A Brief History of the LGBTQ Initialism*, 1

women on the subject of lesbianism. The Feminist Movements were cautious or leery at times that their agendas to move the interest and provide a platform for the voice of women would be misunderstood as one for only lesbian women and not women in general.

The term “gay” became a popular or more commonly used expression in the 1960s.

Preceding the Stonewall generation, this term was often attributed with someone that needs to be shameful of their behavior and lifestyle. It was sometimes viewed as a mental defect or coined as “wires crossed” in being addressed. This terminology is often utilized as a blanket description to all within the LGBTQ community. It was over time that the term “gay” became more typically aligned to referring to and referencing to men to men attraction. Bisexual would be utilized to refer to a person who has both male and female organs or is sexually attracted to both men and women.¹³ An example of this is when someone is willing to date men and women.

Transgender became another categorically descriptive terminology. Transgender is defined as relating to, or being a person, whose gender identity is opposite the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth. Trans genders did not want to be labeled as transsexual in nature. Activists such as Kate Bornstein and Holly Boswell sought to provide a platform for the population who did not fit exactly into typically categorized gender groups or descriptions. These activists as well as others also worked to highlight disparities in terms of what is expected of a gender and the associated norms of society. The letter “q” in the acronym refers to the segment of the population who are questioning their sexual orientation and gender identity.¹⁴

13. Jeffry Iovannone. *A Brief History of the LGBTQ Initialism*, 3

14. Jeffrey Iovannone. *A Brief History of the LGBTQ Initialism*, 3

The q is often affiliated with “queer” or “quaint” which gives an inference to being odd or peculiar. Utilizing the verbiage of queer as a word of reference or context can be taken by some to being offensive, harsh or demeaning to individuals.

Internal Religious Pressures within (UMC)

There have been various issues or matters, which required review, evoked controversy, led towards alternatives being offered and possible decisions being made. The topic as to acceptance of the LBGTQ agenda also has found its way to the steps of Methodism and more specifically the United Methodist Church. This has loomed as a growing matter for some time but is one that has created division and possible split between church districts, regions, neighboring churches and church membership at the core. It is noteworthy to look at some of the factors, which have brought it to this point. It is very probable that not all of the keys might be captured in this discussion, but it is important to note some of the those that did.

It was in January of 1995, that a group of Methodist ministers was present at the union of a lesbian couple in Sacramento. While this was being conducted, there were supporters as well as protestors not too far away. In 1996 at the Methodist General Conference, the rule was voted into effect and added to the “Social Principles” section of the church’s Book of Discipline. The wording was as to follow: Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers or in our churches.¹⁵ The rule was written but those in opposition to it were not going away silently and would not be in full conformity to this decree.

15. Stephen Braun. *Blessing of Gay Couples Union*, 1

It was in the following year that the letter of the law in regards to this rule was tested. This occurred at the First United Methodist Church of Omaha. It was on September 14 at this church when the ceremony for two lesbian women was conducted by Rev. Jimmy Creech. His Bishop suspended him, and the matter due to certain factors grew into both a legal and ecclesiastical forum. His acquittal on March 14th, 1997 resulted in a cascading effect on this subject topic. On the side of those who were opposed to the court's decision, they saw it as the court going forward on this topic in alignment to culture over church doctrine and rules. Those on the other side of the aisle viewed it as a pivotal moment in the history of the of the denomination. This court decision will be like throwing a rock into a body of water with rippling out effect, which does occur. This case and results propelled an enlarging division between the conservatives and liberals. It was in August of 1997, the rule prohibiting same-sex unions was upheld as a binding law and performing such ceremonies would be a punishable offense as stated by the United Methodist Judicial Council.¹⁶

This matter continued to roll forward with momentum. It was in September of 1998 in Chicago that Rev. Greg Dell of Broadway United Methodist Church performed a same-sex union between two men who were his members. The rule to not perform this ceremony was in effect but Rev. Dell had the support of his congregation as well as the conflicting support of his Bishop. His Bishop viewed him as an outstanding pastor. Despite his personal take on the matter, he found him guilty of violating the terms of the rule and suspended him. Reverend Dell's congregation explored means of keeping him with them, and showing their support for his stance and decision.¹⁷

16. B. A. Robinson. *The Trial of Rev. Gregory Dell*, 2

17. B.A. Robinson. *The Trial of Rev. Gregory Dell*, 2

These two cases revealed division on this matter as it pertains to the membership or individuals approaching those in ministry to perform same-sex union ceremonies. It has been recorded that at least 26 UMC clergy have faced complaints or church trials for officiating same-sex weddings or for being openly LGBT.¹⁸ This topic resulted in discussions, dissensions and divisions between conservative and liberal membership. It would have a significant issue if it terminated at this point in regards to membership but like most things, it was not confined to membership only but also spiraled into something that had to be addressed and resolved as to leadership.

The United Methodist Church would now have to face the challenges and opposing views by the clergy. An example of this was in 2016 when Karen Oliveto, the senior pastor of Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco, who was also a married lesbian, was consecrated as bishop of the Mountain Sky Area on July 16. This occurred a day after she was elected at the Western Jurisdictional Conference in Scottsdale, Arizona. This was not only the first time that seven of the 15 clergy elected as United Methodist bishops in the US jurisdictional conference in July would be women. It would also be the first time that the Methodist would elect someone to be a bishop who was openly LGBT. According to Grant Hagiya, Greater Northwest Episcopal Area bishop, “Oliveto’s election was led by the Holy Spirit. There may be political implications, but in our mind, this was the best person. It was not a question of sexual orientation, but a question of who was the best spiritual leader.”¹⁹

18. Emily McFarlan. *Methodist Elect First Openly LGBT Bishop*, 1

19. Emily McFarlan. *Methodist Elect First Openly LGBT Bishop*, 2

According to the Annual conference bylaw or rules governing investigations, trials and appeals, a United Methodist clergyperson may be tried when charged with any of the following:

(1) Not being celibate in singleness or unfaithful in a heterosexual marriage. (2) Being a self-avowed practicing homosexual or conducting ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions. (3) Disobedience to the Order and Discipline of the denomination (4) Dissemination of doctrines contrary to the established doctrines (5) Behavior that undermines the ministry of another pastor and (6) Sexual misconduct. Upholding these items will not impact the decision to proceed with same-sex marriages but also the ordination and appointments of those who ascribe to LGBTQ decision in their personal lives.²⁰

These among other items are pivotal or more so critical points to be taken into consideration as the United Methodist church determines where they go from here. The Traditional Plan was adopted at the UMC General Conference on February 26, 2019.

It would outline the decision of Senior Denominational individuals as to how they would remain status quo on this subject:

The Traditional Plan is the only plan that maintains the current teachings and requirements of the church defining marriage as between one man and one woman, declaring all persons as created in God's image, of sacred worth and welcome in the church's ministries, forbidding clergy from performing same-sex weddings, and forbidding annual conferences from ordaining self-avowed practicing homosexuals. Under this plan, this would remain the position of the whole church (not just parts of it).²¹

In response to the Traditional plan be adopted, 12 of the 54 annual conferences or which equated

20. Thomas Lambrecht. *What is the Modified Traditional Plan, 1*

21. Thomas Lambrecht. *What is the Modified Traditional Plan, 1* to 23% declared that they will not adhere to the requirements or in their view restrictions imposed by the church on same-sex marriages and clergy ordination. The current split in views and future direction of the denomination hinges on and is greatly influenced by anti-organizational sentiments by membership of such annual conferences.

Newton's first law of motion states that an object at rest stays at rest and an object in motion stays in motion. There is tremendous unrest with the UMC to achieve resolution to this matter in regards to the LGBTQ topic as it pertains to same-sex marriages and ordination of clergy following a similar lifestyle. Before we discuss the potential outcomes of the upcoming proposal vote, let us take this opportunity to see how AME is handling this topic.

Potential Considerations by AME

In response to political, societal and cultural pressures, churches are being compelled to take a stand and address issues. Like most churches or denominations, which have traditional historic formulation and foundation, the African Methodist Episcopal church had no formal policy in place that spoke specifically to the issues of the LGBTQ community. Deciding and declaring their stance on this matter gained national attention when in August 2003 an article in USA Today incorrectly had stated that the African Methodist Episcopal Church ordained gay ministers. Bishop Richard Franklin Norris, the 116th Elected and Consecrated Bishop of the AME Church responded to this statement with the following: "The official position of the African Methodist Episcopal Church is not in favor of the ordination of openly gay persons to the ranks of clergy in our church."²²

22. Pauline Chang. *African Methodist Episcopal Church Rejects Gay, 1*

In the early part of 2004, there were additional comments spoken by AME clergy. One of those was Rev. Gregory G. Groover Sr., an AME pastor in Boston. He was quoted in the Boston Globe on Feb. 10, 2004, as saying:

“As black preachers, we are progressive in our social consciousness, and in our political ideology as an oppressed people we will often be against the status quo, but our first call is to hear the voice of God in our Scriptures, and where an issue clearly contradicts our understanding of Scripture, we have to apply that understanding.”²³

It was at the July 2004 AME National Convention that there was a unanimous vote to forbid ministers from performing marriages or same-sex couples civil union ceremonies. In their view marriage equality that would promote same-sex relationships would be in direct contradiction to the understanding of Scripture.²⁴ It was long term considered that this was the sentiment and understanding of AME but this solidified it. The verbiage of The AME vote and statement was the first by a predominantly African-American denomination on the issue of same-sex couple marriage rights. AME is not alone in its decision on this topic. Performing such “blessings ceremonies of same-sex couples is still prohibited by a number of evangelical denominations, including the Assemblies of God and the Southern Baptist Convention. This is also the case in several mainstream denominations.

As would be expected not all churches align themselves to the AME view and others on this topic. Sanctioning gay marriages or union blessings has been approved and conducted

23. Pauline Chang “African Methodist Episcopal Church Rejects Gay”, 1

24. Stance of Faith on LGBTQ Issues: African Methodist Episcopal Church, 2 within the Episcopal Church USA. They have also ordained open and active gay individuals to church leadership. This does not change the fact that the verbiage of Section VII: Marriage Ceremonies of the 2016 Edition of Doctrines and Discipline for AME churches remains intact as to marriage being between a man and woman and not same-sex couples. Like most other denominations, the AME has not yet set a default standard of discipline for those ministers who defy church laws.²⁵

Possible Futuristic Outlook of Methodism

It would have been idealist to think that unity would have been achieved. It was also a long stretch to expect for the restoration of harmony between the two sides subsequent to the Traditional Plan being adopted at the UMC General Conference on February 26, 2019. The fact that this proposal was crafted in December of 2019, supported by many and it is to be presented with other legislations at the United Methodist Church General scheduled for May 5- 15, 2020 in Minneapolis Minnesota, resonates with the voice of dissension on this topic. The questions that loom are (1) what will the UMC denomination look like if it the proposal is approved and (2) what will it look like if the proposal is denied?

The terms of the proposal if approved, will include \$25,000,000 to be given to the traditionalists to establish a new denomination. There will \$2,000,000 placed in an escrow account for future Methodist denominations that may align themselves to the traditionalist view. There will also be an additional \$39,000,000 from The United Methodist Church which will be accessible to the traditionalists to fund specific types of programs.²⁶ Having not only a voice or

25. Pauline Chang. African Methodist Episcopal Church Rejects Gay, 2

26. Jeremy Steele. *Methodist Agree on Compromise to Split Denomination*, 2
 influence in determining the allocation of those program funds will still be granted to the Traditionalist even if after new denomination is formed. Some view this as expensive ransom terms for the freedom to proceed with same-sex agenda within the United Methodist Church. The proposal being ratified would typify the church speaking out on this social topic as well as the voice, support for and concerns of this oppressed segment of society finally being adequately addressed.

There are some internal UMC concerns as to a favorable outcome of the vote. According to their General Council on Finance and Administration, there has been a consistent decline within the membership of UMC churches with forecasted number of under 6 million by 2025.²⁷ The present trend and result presents a very interesting scenario. Church regions in Africa, the Philippines and Europe which were missional areas of UMC in the past will exceed that of the U.S. jurisdictions in the May 2020 vote. There is expected to be 862 delegates at the May conference. The percentage breakdown consists of 55.9% (United States), 32% (Africa), 6% (Philippines) and 1.5% (others).²⁸ Between the timeframe of the 2019 and the upcoming 2020 session, there was a decrease in US numbers but an increase of 18 delegations from Africa and 2 from the Philippines. These countries and areas are typically more conservative in their views and acceptance towards moving forward with same-sex unions and ordination of clergy participating in that lifestyle.

If the proposal is not approved, then a tremendous scenario will exist. UMC legislation will speak towards upholding the traditional view within the UMC, which has been in place for

27. Heather Hahn. *US Dips below Majority of Membership*, 2

28. Heather Hahn. US Dips below Majority of Membership, 2 centuries. If that does occur, the once again upheld legislation will more than likely be confronted by a significant population of dissenting membership and clergy. This group of dissenters will have to decide either to comply with the terms or it to blatantly or subtly proceed with their determined course of action in response to it. This can potentially result in an undeclared split in practices and willingness to face repercussions, versus following the ascribed doctrinal policies and procedures.

Conclusion

The resolution of this topic as to same-sex union and ordination of similar practicing clergy is paramount to the progression of UMC at this time. The stakes are high not only for existing membership and clergy but for the future growth and development of those considering joining the denomination. Some view the outcome of this not as simply a political and societal matter being addressed in terms of injustice and oppression of a group of individuals but also a theological interpretation of the scriptures and appropriate application. The originating roots of Methodism with an emphasis on spreading the gospel is still to remain the main focus of UMC no matter what results. The church must determine to be the church Christ intends for it to be with the context of ministry to the people and for the people. What this will look like for the present and future UMC denomination will soon be decided via the vote of the proposal at the United Methodist Church General scheduled for May 5- 15, 2020 in Minneapolis Minnesota. We pray that the words from The United Methodist Church Hymnal on page 431 will be the deciding factor, - Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me. Let there be peace on earth, the peace that was meant to be. With God Our Creator, family all are we, let us walk with each other in perfect harmony.

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