

Living Faithfully: Human Sexuality and the United Methodist Church¹

Session One

Rules of Engagement for Respectful Group Dialogue

- Listen respectfully, without interrupting
- Listen actively and with an ear to understanding others' views (Don't just think about what you are going to say while someone else is talking.)
- Criticize ideas, not individuals.
- Commit to learning, not debating. Comment in order to share information, not to persuade.
- Avoid blame, speculation, and inflammatory language.
- Allow everyone the chance to speak.
- Avoid assumptions about any member of the class or generalizations about social groups. So not ask individuals to speak for their (perceived) social group.

The United Methodist Position

“The UM position” is determined solely by the acts of General Conference. This global body, comprised of 50% lay and 50% clergy, meets every four years to evaluate and shape the church's polity and doctrine. Our primary “rule book” is *The Book of Discipline*. Boards, agencies, conferences, congregations and individuals can act in accordance with (or opposed to) *The Book of Discipline*, but the only body that can change what the *BOD* says is General Conference. (note: changes requiring a constitutional amendment must be ratified by the annual conferences in order to become official.)

***Book of Discipline* Statements Related to Human Sexuality**

- Marriage
- Divorce
- Human Sexuality
- Equal Rights Regardless of Sexual Orientation
- Qualifications for Ordination
- Homosexual Unions

¹ These notes are a summary of chapters from *Living Faithfully: Human Sexuality and the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 2017. This is provided to guide a two-week course on this topic. What is contained here is not my own work - Dr. Mary Spradlin

- Chargeable Offenses
- United Methodist Funds
- Church Membership

History of Statements Related to Homosexuality

The Methodist Church united with the Evangelical United Brethren in 1968. In 1972, language introduced at General Conference to affirm “homosexuals as persons of sacred worth” was amended to add the language regarding the practice of homosexuality being “incompatible with Christian teaching.” Other restrictions regarding ordination and funding followed. In 1988, the incompatibility reference was softened to include the affirmation that “God’s grace is available to all.” The prohibition against clergy performing homosexual unions was first added in 1996.

The UMC has struggled with the issue of homosexuality. The *BOD* is not infallible (*BOD*, p. v), and there are mechanisms in place for changing it.

General Conference 2016

With emotions running high on all sides, an historic decision was made to “table” all conversations related to human sexuality and ask the Council of Bishops to appoint a task force to help our denomination find “A Way Forward.” Delegates voted to have a special called session of General Conference in 2019. (Our next regularly scheduled General Conference is 2020.)

Who We Are

The UMC is comprised of almost 12 million members in 45,000 churches spread across multiple continents. There are 56 annual conferences in the USA, and a total of 131 around the globe. Annual conferences all have at least two delegates (one lay, one clergy). Number of delegates is determined by the size of the conference.

In the USA, there are varying views toward homosexuality. In some other countries, the practice is literally a crime.

When we make decisions at General Conference, the entire global body votes, even if the topic is not relevant to the delegate (i.e. lay people vote on clergy pension decisions; those outside the USA vote on clergy pension decisions, which only affect American clergy).

What Did John Wesley Preach About Homosexuality?

We have no records that Wesley preached on this topic specifically. Wesleyan theology places an emphasis on heart and life, which includes our sexual practices.

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral

John Wesley sought theological discernment through Scripture, clarified by tradition, reason and experience. Today, we call this the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” The *BOD* states, “Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illuminated by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason. Scripture is primare, revealing the Word of God ‘so far as it is necessary for our salvation.’”

Wesley scholar Albert C. Outler explained that Wesley, when faced with a challenging issue, would first go to the Holy Bible. “Even so,” Outler wrote, “he was well aware that Scripture alone had rarely settled any controverted point of doctrine.”

Comparison of Understandings (see charts)

Conclusion

- Supporting the current UM teaching on homosexuality does not mean that one is homophobic.
- Wanting to change the current UM teaching does not mean that one devalues Scripture and Christian tradition.

It’s a highly complex and personal issue.

When you question a fellow Christian’s belief, you are also questioning the process by which he or she came to this belief. We are all charged to engage in spiritual practices of daily prayer, reading of Scripture, regular worship, soliciting wise counsel, and acts of service as means of discernment.

But we don’t all arrive at the same conclusions.

This is a mystery; it may even be a gift from Christ.

The Holy Spirit is another source of authority for United Methodists. It is a powerful force for a way forward that we cannot yet see, and it often works through our hearts, not our heads.

Let us all commit to Christ-like humility and love as we strive to live faithfully together.

Action Item:

Seek out someone in your life whom you know has a different view on homosexuality than you do. Ask them how they arrived at their belief. Ask them how they think their belief has been misunderstood. The goal is to just listen and ask questions, not engage in a debate. Pray for this person throughout your week.

Next week, we will discuss:

- Same-gender marriage
- Ordination of practicing homosexuals
- Where are we now?