

# **Living Faithfully: Human Sexuality and the United Methodist Church<sup>1</sup>**

## Session Two

### **Is Same-Gender Marriage Compatible with Christian Teaching?**

#### Current *Book of Discipline* Statements Regarding Same-gender Marriage:

1972 – Social Principles amended to read, “...though we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”

1980 – Added language to Social Principles that affirmed the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman

1996 – Added a statement that “ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches.”

2004 – Added language into P2702 re: “Chargeable Offenses” to read that clergy may be charged for “practices declared by the UMC to be incompatible with Christian teachings, including, but not limited to: being a self-avowed practicing homosexual; or conducting ceremonies which celebrate homosexual unions; or performing same-sex wedding ceremonies.”

#### Roots of Current Teachings on Marriage:

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 – Paul lists unjust people who will not inherit the kingdom of God, including sexually immoral people...and “both participants in same-sex intercourse.” This phrase is problematic, but appears to point in some way to male homosexual activity.

Similar negative mentions are made in Romans 1:26-27 and 1 Timothy 1:10.

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<sup>1</sup> 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

Leviticus 18:22 also prohibits “sexual intercourse with a man as you would with a woman; it is a detestable practice.”

### The Foundation for a Christian Affirmation of Same-gender Marriage

Rev. Adam Hamilton recognizes the need to interpret the Scriptures and understand how the “express the heart of God for us today” by considering the passages in the light of Scripture’s major themes, especially Jesus’ command to love God and love neighbor.

The early church ultimately decided not to make circumcision a requirement for Gentile converts despite what the Scriptures taught.

The Bible’s view of marriage includes practices that modern Christians consider morally problematic:

- Polygamy was acceptable in the Old Testament
- Married men sleeping with concubines to produce more heirs
- Levirate marriage required a man to marry his dead brother’s wife to produce an heir for his dead brother

We interpret these passages in light of the broader biblical witness and conclude that monogamy is the understanding of marriage that is faithful to what we find in the Bible.

Could God be revealing to the church a different understanding of Christian marriage that includes same-gender marriage?

- Our understanding of divorce has evolved over time.

### Renewed Debate in the Midst of U.S. Supreme Court Marriage Ruling

Rev. Tom Lambrecht, of the Good News movement, states, “Our commitment to biblical truth does not depend upon judicial affirmation by the Supreme Court of this or any other nation.”

Bishop Warner H. Brown Jr. has a different perspective: “...if we seek to be an inclusive church that serves all of our parishioners, and all of our neighbors, we will have to consider how we treat all people equally.”

Our church laws prohibits clergy from performing same-gender weddings, but it does not prohibit offering a prayer or a homily in such a ceremony.

### Marriage Discussion Impacted by the Global Membership of the UMC

United Methodist has experienced strong growth in 18 African countries, even while membership in UM churches in the US is declining. At 2016 General Conference, approximately 30 percent of the delegates were from African countries.

In Africa, homosexual acts are criminalized in 38 out of 54 countries.

UM Bishops in Africa issued a statement in 2015: “As a church, we are called to be in solidarity with people who suffer as a result of unjust political systems, wars, famine, poverty, natural disasters, illiteracy, etc. We believe that we can be united around these issues rather than allow ourselves to be ripped apart by issues of sexual orientation.”

### Resistance to UM Teachings on Same-gender Marriage

Retired Bishop Melvin G. Talbert calls clergy to perform same-gender marriages as an act of “biblical obedience.”

In 2012, Rev. Adam Hamilton and Rev. Mike Slaughter introduced a motion that called the church recognize that we “agree to disagree” on this issue. GC voted to retain the current prohibition against same-gender marriage ceremonies.

Talbert proclaims that “the derogatory language and restrictive laws in our *BOD* are immoral and unjust and no longer deserve our loyalty and obedience.

Talbert blessed a wedding in 2013, in spite of requests from the Council of Bishops and local Bishop not to do so.

Talbert’s violation of the *BOD* was resolved without a church trial, which could have led to the loss of his credentials. A “just resolution” process was used, instead. Some feel that a purposeful violation of the *BOD* by a bishop should have had more serious consequences.

In 2016, the New England, Desert Southwest, California-Pacific, and Pacific-Northwest Conferences all passed resolutions saying that they would not comply with the *BOD*'s prohibitions on same-gender marriage. The California-Nevada Conference passed a resolution calling for judicial proceedings to be stopped against people who did not comply with matters of homosexuality in the *Discipline*.

### Possible Outcomes When a Clergyperson Performs a Same-gender Marriage

- Anyone may file a complaint with a Bishop
- There is a six-year statute of limitations on the filing of complaints, with a few exceptions
- If a satisfactory resolution has not taken place within 90 days, the bishop can either dismiss the complaint if the cabinet consents, or refer the complaint to the church counsel (attorney) who must be a clergy person.
- If a trial is convened, the bishop appoints another bishop to be the presiding official (similar to judge)
- At least 9 of 13 jurors must vote for a conviction in order for a conviction to take place
- At any point in the process, the Bishop may call for a “just resolution” process.
- The goal of just resolution is to develop a written agreement between the church counsel and the respondent (person who has been charged), which achieves a reconciliation between the parties.
- A trained, impartial mediator facilitates the process
- All the parties involved, including the person who filed the complaint and the respondent, must agree to enter into the just resolution process

### How Cases Where Clergy Perform Same-gender Marriages Have Been Resolved

Rev. Frank Shaefer underwent a church trial in November 2013 after performing a same-sex marriage ceremony for his son. He was found guilty, and suspended for 30 days. He was told that if he could not commit to uphold the entirety of the *BOD*, he would have to surrender his clergy credentials. Shafer refused, and his BOM asked him to surrender his credentials. However, an appeals panel determined that this penalty was illegal, and his credentials were later reinstated.

In 2015, two clergy in the Virginia Conference were suspended through the just resolution process after performing same-gender weddings. Rev. Amanda Miller

Garber was given a one-month suspension without pay. Rev. John D. Copenhaver, received a three-month suspension.

Do no harm – “a tragic conflict in our church”

- UMs who support the church’s current position feel harm when clergy members officiate at same-gender weddings. This is breach of clergy covenant.
- LGBTQ people feel harm because of the UMC’s current position

Some have called for an end to clergy trials, as a waste of time and an “abomination to God.” Others argue that trials keep individuals from asserting that they are wiser than the church and allow for conversations to happen.

Christian Conferencing is our deeply rooted United Methodist way of moving through disagreements and disputes.

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## **Is Ordaining Practicing Homosexuals Compatible with Christian Teaching?**

In 1980, an attempt to add language forbidding the ordination of practicing homosexuals failed to pass.

In 1984, language was added to the *BOD* stating, “The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church. This passed by a narrow margin: 525-442.

In this viewpoint, ordaining someone who is a practicing homosexual would be like ordaining someone practicing adultery.

Many who favor inclusion point to the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell rule.” We do, in fact, ordain gay and lesbian persons as long as they remain quiet. This is viewed by some as a form of oppression.

There is also a concern about invasion of privacy. If two men live together, who is to say whether or not they are homosexual, or engaged in same-sex intercourse?

Some object to the use of the term “homosexual,” which focuses on sex - not intimacy, commitment, or building a life and family. Some gays and lesbians are aware of their orientation as adolescents who are not engaged in sexual behavior. Also, we do not refer to straight people as “self-avowed practicing heterosexuals.”

The *Discipline* does not address people who are transgender, intersex (physical anatomy doesn't correspond to the typical definitions of male and female bodies), or nonbinary (gender identities that do not correspond with the typical definitions of masculine and feminine).

### A Shared Covenant

UM clergy enter into a life-time commitment to dedicate our whole lives to the personal and spiritual disciplines the covenant of ordained ministry requires. (*BOD*, P303.3)

In May of 2015, 15 New York clergy and clergy candidates came out as gay on the same day. A few days later, the Pacific-Northwest Board of Ordained Ministry publicly stated their affirmation that “people of all sexual orientations and gender identities” could meet the qualifications for ordination. Baltimore-Washington and New York BOMs also make sexual orientation or gender identity an issue for candidates. In 2016, at least 8 conferences took some action toward ordination, commissioning or election of LGBTQ clergy.

The South Georgia Annual Conference passed a motion (non-binding) to ask their bishop to not receive any clergy from another conference who publicly expressed an intention to not uphold the *Discipline*.

In April of 2017, the Judicial Council ruled that all boards must follow the *Discipline*. The JC stated, “There are many ways to accomplish this investigative responsibility, ranging from evaluating written exams, conducting personal interviews, to reading social media postings of candidates.”

In spite of this ruling, a number of BOMs said they would continue to disobey the *Discipline*.

In July of 2016, Karen Oliveto, an openly gay clergy member who is in a same-gender marriage, was elected as a bishop in the UMC. At the time of her

election, bishop Oliveto was Senior Pastor of Glide Memorial in San Francisco, one of the largest United Methodist congregations.

The South Central Jurisdiction contested this election and consecration. In a 6-3 decision, the Judicial Council ruled in April 2017 that the consecration of Bishop Oliveto was in violation of church law. But they also ruled that she “remains in good standing,” pending any complaints against her or those who consecrated her - which would be resolved in the Western Jurisdiction. For now, Bishop Oliveto remains a bishop.

### Using the Quadrilateral to Consider the Issue of Ordination of Practicing Homosexuals

#### Scripture:

- There are many stories in scripture of God calling individuals: Moses, Aaron, Jeremiah, Amos, etc.
- Scripture tells us that women should not speak in church or have authority over men (1 Timothy 2:11-15); scripture also teaches that women were the first to spread the good news of Jesus’ resurrection (Luke 24:1-11)
- In the book of Acts, Peter quotes Joel to highlight diverse people receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:18)
- God calls who God will. Those who support ordination of LGBTQ persons see restrictions on ordination as restrictions on God’s spirit.

#### Tradition:

- There was a time in our Methodist tradition when dancing, drinking and smoking were grounds for punitive action for clergy
- We used to not ordain divorced persons. We now do, because we recognize spiritual fruit in the lives of divorced persons who are called to ministry.
- We did not ordain women until 1956. Prior to this, the *Discipline* read: “Our Church does not recognize women as preachers, with authority to occupy the pulpit, to read Holy Scriptures, and to preach, as ministers of the Lord Jesus Christ...” (from 1930 *BOD*)
  - Since 1964, *BOD* has read, simply, “Women are included in all provisions of the Discipline referring to the ministry.”
- Some point out that it is not one’s sexual orientation that is an issue, but one’s sexual practices. One can choose whether or not to engage in same-sex intercourse, but not whether to be a male or female.

Reason:

- A person is *called* by God and *confirmed* by the community. This is not just about individual discernment
- This restriction can be the church's way of directing LGBTQ persons toward other forms of ministry and leadership as a fulfillment of their calling

Experience:

- "Experience" per the Quadrilateral is the Christian's experience of salvation, not simply the lived experiences of an individual or group.
- There is a difference between one's salvation experience and the experience of one's sexual orientation.
- Some LGBTQ persons describe their coming out as an assurance of salvation and God's grace in their lives
- The salvation experience could include acceptance and peace with one's sexual orientation, but not acceptance of the practice of same-sex intercourse. Nothing in the *Discipline* prohibits someone who chooses to be celibate from becoming ordained, regardless of that person's sexual orientation.