

Getting to Church Vitality

- Tom Berlin - June 21, 2016

At the Virginia Annual Conference, I shared a presentation describing some of the conversation that occurred before and during General Conference in meetings called by Bishop Warner Brown, former president of the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church (UMC). These meetings were forthright and insightful and a great example of what we call “holy conferencing.” My goal was to share observations about where United Methodists are on two issues related to human sexuality: same-sex marriage and the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals. These issues are important in the life of the church because they apply to real people. These are our children, church members, friends, parents, neighbors and relatives. Ideologically we are a big tent church, so we don’t all think the same about these matters.

These slides have categories that I first heard from Tom Lambrecht, the vice president of Good News Magazine. I agree with these categories, understanding that they apply in this discussion only to the two issues listed above and to people in the United States. I think Tom has attempted to create simple frameworks that are not simplistic. Since these issues are unusually divisive, I find the categories useful to understand the views of others.

Below is my definition of these categories:

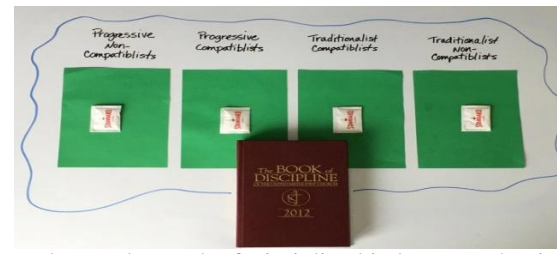
- Traditionalist Non-Compatibilists: People in this zone are satisfied with the current restrictive wording of the Book of Discipline on same-sex marriage and the ordination of people who are practicing homosexuals. They want to see the church live out what they feel are obvious prohibitions in Scripture regarding homosexual acts. For them it is an issue of personal holiness. They are concerned that if these passages are compromised, all passages related to practices of sexual ethics and personal holiness will be compromised. Their concerns about change are of such importance to them that they would rather be in a church where all agree on these matters than feel

personally compromised by a church with a diverse view on human sexuality.

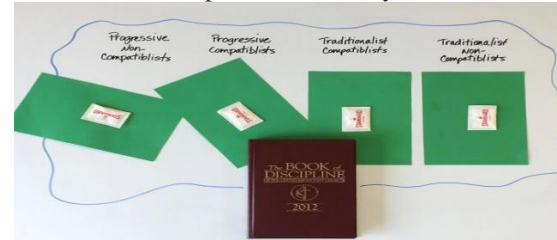
- Traditionalist Compatibilists: These people hold traditional views on human sexuality but understand that other pastors or churches would like to have the option of offering marriage ceremonies to same-sex couples. Some Annual Conferences want to have the ability to ordain people who are practicing homosexuals. While they do not want to be forced into performing such a marriage, they can live in a denomination where this occurs, understanding that there are many issues beyond this where they find unity in our connection.
- Progressive Compatibilists: Many of these people have moved from Traditionalist Compatibilists into this area in more recent years. They would like to see the church offer ordination to all people and same-sex marriage to committed Christian couples. They understand that their friends on the right are not where they are and believe that the unity Christ prayed for the church can be upheld despite this difference. They respect the right of their traditionalist friends and do not want them to be forced into situations that would violate their personal beliefs. Most United Methodists are compatibilists. I would guess that 70% or more of us fall into one of these two areas.
- Progressive Non-Compatibilists: People in this space have deep concerns for the call of Scripture for justice to all people and Jesus’ deferential care of the marginalized. These two points of biblical interpretation, among others, lead them to work for full inclusion in the life of the church. This is such a high value for them that they only want to be in a church that reflects this belief and will work for change as long as the church does not.



The Book of Discipline states the boundaries of belief and practice of the United Methodist Church. Every four years delegates from around the globe come to General Conference, our worldwide meeting, and have the opportunity to examine and change our book of governance. Since the 1970s we have been debating these two issues.



In theory, the Book of Discipline binds us together in a common faith and practice as Wesleyan Christians.

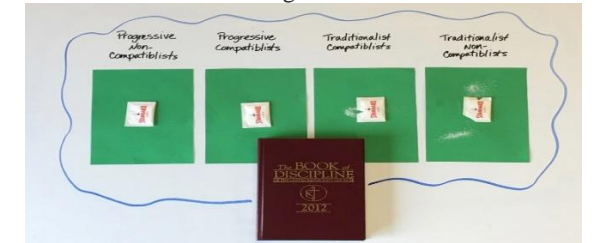


Difficulties have arisen in recent years as Progressives have violated the Book of Discipline. Clergy have performed same-sex marriages. Conferences have ordained people who are self-avowed, practicing homosexuals. Progressives see these as acts of civil disobedience that lead to greater justice and mercy. When charges have been brought against clergy who have performed these ceremonies, there has been a wide variance in the consequences spelled out in the just resolution process. The consequences tend to depend on the category that describes the presiding bishop of the Annual Conference where the infraction took place. Traditionalists find it bewildering when progressive pastors or conferences get out of bounds with the Book of Discipline and willfully break the covenant that it creates.



One of the key frustrations for traditionalists is that the decision of progressives to perform same-sex marriages has consequences in their lives. People in their churches leave. This demonstrates the power of connectionalism. People in Oklahoma may leave their church because of a marriage performed by a UMC pastor in Maine. Losing members is a painful event in the life of a pastor and a church, and they are frustrated that this is the consequence they bear for keeping the

Book of Discipline and remaining in the UMC connection. Traditionalists are more frustrated when bishops do not bring any real consequences to pastors’ decisions to violate the Book of Discipline because they are in agreement with these pastors who perform the marriage ceremonies.



Traditionalist Compatibilists find that members of their churches, which are often more ideologically diverse on these two issues, also leave. This is equally painful when it occurs, even if it is less likely to happen broadly in these congregations.



One reaction to this is to change the wording of the Book of Discipline to create definitive consequences to these acts of disobedience. An example was legislation at the 2016 General Conference that would have required bishops to give clergy performing a same-sex marriage one year of unpaid leave. A second offense would lead to the surrender of ministerial credentials. While the Judicial Council of the UMC ruled this legislation out of order, it is an example of an attempted change to the Book of Discipline to require conformity to its practices.

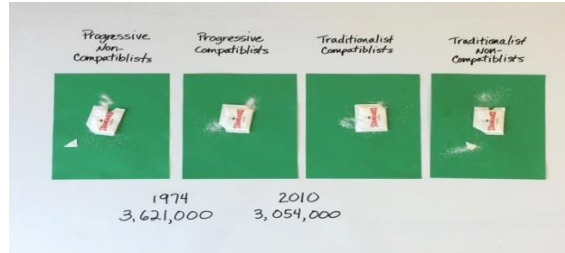


Progressive Non-Compatibilists argue that they are also facing consequences to the lack of change in the Book of Discipline. Their members are weary of language regarding human sexuality that they find offensive. They are also weary of the debate,

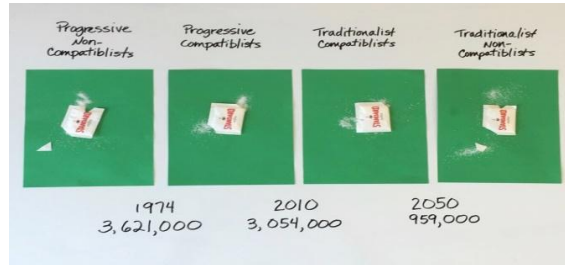
especially now that national law in the U.S. has moved beyond the practice of the church regarding marriage rights to all people. The work they have done for justice in this area has not had any impact on the Book of Discipline, and they are also losing members who are discouraged by the lack of progress. Their friends and family members are leaving the church, which is painful.



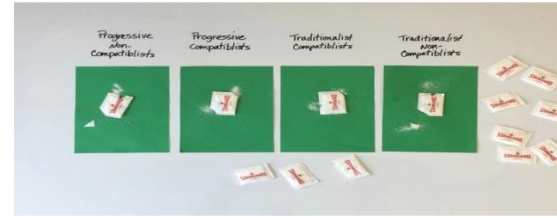
Because the Book of Discipline has not changed, Progressive Compatibilists are losing members as well. The difficulty of being a centrist in this conversation, no matter whether you lean right or left on these two issues, is that people are always disappointed in you or the church. I describe myself as a Progressive Compatibilist. After General Conference I received two emails from church members within a week of each other. One expressed disappointment that no changes were made regarding human sexuality. It was from a couple in our church with an adult child who is gay. They wondered how the church could be so conservative as to exclude their son. Another church member contacted me to say that he would be leaving the congregation because I was so liberal on these issues. In an ideologically diverse church, the center is frustrating to both sides. This would be a small matter, except that it involves people. These people who are leaving are members of the church. After being in the church with them, I have grown to care about them, even though I am aware that we don't agree on every issue and sometimes disagree greatly on particular issues. Even then I don't want to lose them. However, those impacted by the current practices of the church related to human sexuality are also people. As I stated earlier, they are our neighbors, children, church members, relatives and friends. So we have to talk about these difficult things and figure out how we live together or live separately from each other. But the constant conflict over these issues seems damaging to everyone.



But here is another truth, one that is often lost in the debate over human sexuality. It is lost because human systems are finite and only have a limited supply of energy. We forget that, but if you go to General Conference and begin to track how time was used, you discover that humans can only handle so many topics over a limited period of time. The truth is this: no matter how you would describe your views regarding human sexuality in the church, everyone is leaking members. Everyone. Your ideology on these issues is not a predictor of the vitality of your church. If we spend our time and energy on the conflict over marriage and ordination, we will have little left over to consider that our average worship attendance, along with every other metric of vitality, is diminishing over time.



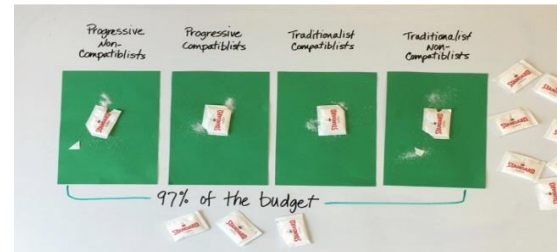
It would be wise to focus on church vitality, because the prediction is that by 2050, we will be one-third the size we are today. That will have deep implications for the United Methodist Church. I am biased toward Methodism. I think we have the most sensible theology for the current time. What a shame to see it slowly fade away while we spend our time and energy fighting over human sexuality. It seems like it might be better to help each other have the future each desires on these matters so that all can move to other important matters in the church, like sharing Christ with a world that is lost in so many ways.



Here is another dynamic that impacts the United Methodist Church. When we look at the international United Methodist Church, most Europeans are somewhere in the center of the ideological spectrum. African and Asian United Methodists are predominately traditionalists. They are more conservative than the vast majority of traditionalists in the U.S. on matters of human sexuality. Many live in predominately conservative Islamic countries where homosexual acts are illegal and that are unsafe for people in the LGBT community.



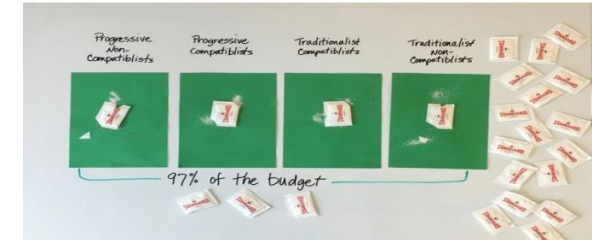
The Asian and African delegates to General Conference tend to agree with traditionalists in the U.S. and are in more active dialogue with Traditionalist Non-Compatibilists. This means that they are more likely to be a strategic voting block around issues like human sexuality.



The reason the decline of the UMC in the US should be of great interest to those in Asia and Africa is that 97 percent of the denominational budget comes from the U.S. This means that if Centrists, who constitute the majority of all United Methodists in the U.S., fracture from the denomination, the economic model that sustains schools, clinics, hospitals and other denominational mission ventures across the globe will fail. This will have a dramatic impact on the UMC in Asia and Africa. At the current rate of decline, this model will probably fail due to what doctors call "a

failure to thrive" in about 14-16 years. This is another reason it would be wise for the UMC to define itself clearly regarding same-sex marriage and ordination and then discern if there are ways people might participate in its ministry structure while finding a non-punitive way to exit the denomination.

All of us seem to be weary of the arguments. Few of us seem to be changing our opinions, especially the non-compatibilists. All of us need to get focused on the vitality of the local church. This would require us to reimagine what it means to be a global and connectional church while still retaining the largest number of United Methodists possible in a newly constituted denomination.



The Asian and African sector of the United Methodist Church is growing at the same time that the U.S. sector is shrinking. In four to eight years, it will be unlikely that the General Conference will do anything related to human sexuality other than make consequences for disobedience more stringent. This will probably lead those on the progressive side to withhold apportionments or leave the denomination.

There is a place everyone seems to agree should be the focus once these issues are resolved: making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. United Methodists have the opportunity to share the Christian faith in ways that makes sense in the multicultural and increasingly complex world in which we live. We have created first class educational institutions, mission centers, vocational training, clinics, hospitals and health initiatives that end ignorance and suffering and give people hope and a future. We have international relationships that enable us to travel and learn from other cultures. Our efforts, prompted and guided by the Holy Spirit, have given credence to the idea that the Christian faith is holistic and far more than a passive longing for life after death. Now is the time to invest ourselves so that we can share Christ, make disciples and, by God's grace, transform the world. That will require a new level of creative thinking and a fresh investment of our energy that is currently applied elsewhere in our system.

