

The United Methodist divorce is a mistake

Caucusing is easy. Church is hard.

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [October 2022](#) issue



Have you heard? We Methodists—middle-of-the-road, pious but not showy or pushy, cautiously into social justice but also evangelicalish—are getting a divorce. Unable to resolve arguments about same-sex marriage, a couple of years ago the United Methodists began to talk separation, deluding ourselves that we’d have a friendly divorce. By now we’ve lawyered up, and things are getting ugly.

When I was a pastor, if a couple in my congregation brought up the possibility of divorce, I tried to be a good listener, and I kept in mind the fact that there are situations in which divorce is the least-bad option. But often I felt compelled to say, “As your pastor, I’m prejudiced toward togetherness. Got no easy fixes, but it’s my job to press you to do the forgiveness, truth-telling, listening, and hard work required to stay together. Togetherness, even amid acrimonious arguments, is better than separation. Better to be in relationship than to be right. Jesus backs me up. Now, let’s talk.”

If all else failed, I'd plead, "But you promised!" and lay on the scripture: "Put up with one another" (Col. 3:13).

I may be wasting my breath. But here's my pastor's pitch for why schism from the United Methodist Church is a bad idea.

After just 40 years of debate on same-sex marriage and LGBTQ ordination—a mere twinkling of the eye in church history—some self-proclaimed traditionalists (and a very few progressives) say they've tired of arguing. At some point we Methodists began loving our caucus (we have dozens) more than our congregation. Political polarities overcame our biblically authorized identity, and we became a church in centrifuge.

Caucusing is easy; church is hard. Unable to convert you to my point of view, I'll hunker down in my gated community of buddies who think as I do and call that ecclesia. We thereby say to the world that Jesus Christ can't make and sustain community out of people whom I don't like and are not my type. Rather than ask, "What's Christ up to in our neighborhood?" we say, "I refuse to be part of a church that doesn't reflect my values before I came to church."

In May the conservative (they prefer "orthodox") breakaway Global Methodist Church had an inauspicious birth. It's a church created by a couple of right wing (oops, "traditional") caucus groups. They don't accept the label schismatic (what schismatic ever has?) and prefer instead to say that they have been pushed out of the church they once loved.

Give me a break. No UMC congregation in the world has ever kicked out a member for being too orthodox, traditional, or conservative.

Because each UMC church building is held in trust by the denomination, not the congregation, divorce will be expensive. (A dozen lawyers hawk their wares on the web, promising to help you take your church building from the clutches of the UMC.) Because a two-thirds majority of the church members present can pass a vote to leave the UMC, divorce will be devastating to the many loyal United Methodists who'd rather stay.

GMC apologists are desperate not to be perceived as bolting because of a single contemporary social issue. Yet their draft Transitional Book of Discipline defines the first of their "basic qualifications of the ordained" as "fidelity in Christian marriage

between one man and one woman, chastity in singleness.” This comes first, before “knowledge and love of God” and “a call by God and the people of God.”

Really, GMC? Aren’t you setting the clergy competence bar a bit low?

The GMC draft discipline, though admirably short, is mostly filched from the UMC. New rules on the election and tenure of bishops, the ownership of congregational property, and kicking out clergy have been written as a cure for unhappiness with the UMC, without regard to renewal of the mission of the church.

In a decade or so, when asked by some young, upstart clergy, “Why are we doing church this way?” you’ll have to say, “Well, back in the 2020s, there was a Methodist out West somewhere who said she didn’t believe in the resurrection, or maybe it was a preacher who was a drag queen, I forget, but anyway, we took out our rage by forming a new denomination.” Should I, an aging UMC bishop, be envious that the GMC will have the most autocratic, powerful episcopacy in the history of Methodism, badass bishops who are free to kick out errant clergy faster than you can say, “to heck with due process”?

Frankly, I was surprised that the GMC’s draft discipline finds so little in the UMC to reform. Why doesn’t it explain why they’re taking the drastic step of leaving one church to form another just because the church is full of people who are, as they see it, wrong?

Earlier this year, a confab of GMC supporters produced a book called *The Next Methodism* to give ideological justification for their departure. In it I read nothing contrary to what the UMC taught the schismatics to believe about God, certainly no theology that’s not already in the UMC discipline. No, the GMC, fed up with United Methodists speaking out on social issues, is forming a church inspired by a single contemporary social issue. Any new denomination must struggle with graying members, changing understandings of gender and sexuality, and a culture in which church—any church—is optional. So the GMC’s big idea to set right what’s wrong with the UMC is to form another denomination—destined to be one of the smallest Methodist bodies in the world—that will end debate on the issue that they swear is not their one issue?

GMC advocates charge that the UMC has sold out to contemporary culture. But who told the GMC that same-sex relationships are the chief challenge in the UMC? Not the Bible. Not Jesus, who makes not even a cameo appearance in most of these

debates.

In interviews with hundreds of UM pastors I've heard, "I want a church where some things are fixed and final without debate." Dream on. If the apostle Paul couldn't figure out how to plant such a church, you can't either.

As a preacher, I know the frustration of being unable to talk others into my position on some important subject. Sure, I've longed to excommunicate the intransigents. Alas, Jesus doesn't work that way. He never walked away from an argument or refused conversation with even the most thickheaded of opponents.

There is little reason to believe that the GMC is forming a denomination appreciably better than the UMC it seeks to supplant. The UMC is guilty of many screwups and infidelities. (I've hammered it for them in three books.) And yet, none of those problems can be solved by votes of the UMC General Conference—or by separating from the UMC.

Most Methodists are clueless about the Book of Discipline, can't name their bishop, are uninterested in clergy power plays, and have never run across a member of General Conference. In their unconcern for Methodism beyond their congregation, I think they've got things in proper perspective. The denomination is largely irrelevant to their encounters with Christ, in church or out, and contributes little to their taking responsibility for the mission that Christ has assigned to their congregation.

Fragmentation distracts Methodists from the deeper, long-term issue that is more determinative of our future than our divisions: our median age is 65. Schismatic divorce is easier than figuring out how to reach a new generation of Wesleyans. Methodists, ignore denominational squabbles. Don't vote. Focus upon the mission that God has entrusted to your local church. Flip Wesley's "the world is my parish" to "my parish is our neighborhood."

Friends say, "Don't waste your breath. Let 'em go." No, the UMC will be weaker when they do: from the loss of financial resources and of a few of our dearest, most vital congregations and our most creative, entrepreneurial pastors. Progressives will also lose some of their most adept, doggedly persistent, Bible-loving interlocutors, leaving them stuck in a denominational echo chamber with an even higher percentage of people who think just like they do.

Dissident conservatives, please don't abandon me to my theological blind spots and the clutch of goofy liberals in my congregation. Though you don't love scripture more than I do, some of your pompous, painful, pretentious criticism of our church is, worst of all, *true*.

In his stemwinder sermon "On Schism," John Wesley begged those thinking about church divorce to stay and fight. Schism is always counter to the togetherness produced by Christ: "Separation is evil in itself, being a breach of brotherly love, so it brings forth evil fruit . . . the most mischievous consequences. It opens a door to all unkind tempers, both in ourselves and others."

Old Daddy Wesley, we've messed up again.

This article was edited August 17 to remove the inaccurate claim that a Free Methodist seminary convened the conversations that led to The Next Methodism, as well as to clarify that disaffiliation from the UMC requires a two-thirds majority of those members present for the vote, not a simple majority of all members.