

Let's talk theology: How divided are United Methodists?

by [O. Wesley Allen Jr.](#) in the [June 15, 2004](#) issue

In 2001, representatives of the Confessing and the Good News movements and representatives of the Reconciling Ministries Network and the Clergy Alliance for a Professing Church came to DePauw University, where I was chaplain, to discuss homosexuality and the church. Since their divergent positions on homosexuality were well known, I invited the panelists to answer the following questions: “In light of the impasse that the United Methodist Church has seemingly reached on issues related to homosexuality, what path should the denomination take in the future? Should we continue to debate until one side definitively wins and a consensus is reached? Should we strive to revise our denominational polity so that different practices are allowed in different congregations and conferences? Or should we split in some fashion?”

I was surprised at the answers. At the denominational level, the conservatives were winning the day. Church law declared homosexuality incompatible with Christian teaching and forbade ordination and unions for homosexuals. Yet it was members of the Confessing Movement who said they thought it was time to consider dividing the denomination.

I especially remember one conservative, from whose mouth and pen I had previously seen venom flow, saying with great sorrow but also with a tone of generosity to those on the other side of the debate, “Perhaps the only way we are all going to be able to be in authentic ministry is if we admit that our differences are irreconcilable and find a way to effect a just division of the denomination so that we can follow Christ on our separate paths.”

In contrast, the liberal panelists, those who were losing the denominational battle, were completely averse to the possibility of a split. They expressed in no uncertain terms their commitment to continue with the debate until they had won and homosexuals received full fellowship in the church.

This same dynamic has just repeated itself at the UMC's quadrennial General Conference. Delegates reaffirmed and even somewhat strengthened the church's stance against homosexuality. Meanwhile, Bill Hinson, president of the Confessing Movement, suggested that "the time has come when we must begin to explore an amicable and just separation that will free us both from the cycle of pain and conflict. Such a just separation will protect the property rights of churches and the pension rights of clergy. It will also free us to reclaim our high calling and to fulfill our mission in the world."

Liberal groups rejected the idea. The Common Witness Coalition—which comprises the Reconciling Ministries Network, the Methodist Federation for Social Action, and Affirmation—was quoted in a news report as "not in favor of a schism and . . . fully committed to inclusion of all opinions."

As a liberal who more often feels like a stranger in the church he loves than a host, I am puzzled by this dynamic. When those who have won the day on this issue (and by "the day" I mean every denominational vote on the issue since 1972) and are gaining more and more power in the denomination offer the possibility of a just separation, why do those who claim to be on the side of the oppressed want to maintain the oppressive status quo?

I suspect it is because they truly hope and believe that a just consensus (as defined by those of us on the left) can be reached if we simply debate the issue long enough. If this is the reason, then they are misdiagnosing the cause of discontent, and ignoring the schism that has already claimed our church.

As one who supports the ordination of homosexuals and wants to see the denomination affirm the rights of gays and lesbians to enter into holy unions, I wish to join with my brothers and sisters on the right who are calling the United Methodists to examine the possibility of separation. The division over homosexuality is not enough on its own to recommend the idea. More important is the recognition that our division goes to the theological core. United Methodists answer the following questions in significantly different ways:

What is the root problem of the human condition (i.e., what constitutes sin)?

How does the good news of Jesus Christ's birth, ministry, death, resurrection and exaltation both reveal and address this problem (i.e., what is salvation and how is it effected)?

What is the mission of the church as the Body of Christ in cooperating with divine salvation in addressing the human condition (i.e., what ecclesiology is to be affirmed in light of answers given to the first two questions)?

And underlying all of these questions: What is the proper understanding and use of scripture in answering these questions?

A resolution on church unity was overwhelmingly passed on the last day of General Conference. It stated that “as United Methodists we remain in covenant with one another, even in the midst of disagreement, and reaffirm our commitment to work together for our common mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ throughout the world.” If the delegates had seriously examined the language of the resolution and defined its terms, they would have discovered great disagreement in the church concerning what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. United Methodists disagree about who can be a disciple because we have different understandings of sin and salvation. We must quit using vague and clichéd theological language to patch over our differences.

If we hope to see either a denominational separation or a reuniting of the left and the right as a faithful response to God’s calling for all of us to be church, we must be clear in theological terms about why we must separate or why we should stay together before we determine how to separate or how to stay together.

Moreover, the UMC must carefully explore these theological questions with honesty, because the polarization of the denomination over homosexuality does not represent the full theological spectrum found in our laity and clergy.

The tone of the current debate is set by those at the ends of the spectrum. During the discussion of the resolution on church unity, one delegate, Bill McAlilly, made a passionate plea for involving the “Methodist middle” in the continuing debate in order to “hold the tension of the opposites” and “contain those on both sides of the equation.” But McAlilly fails to recognize that the moderates have little power to shape the tone of the debate, because they are the battleground. Those on the left and those on the right are constantly trying to persuade the moderates to vote with their side.

However, if the full theological spectrum of the UMC is laid bare, the moderates will be the ones mediating the separation instead of bearing the brunt of it. Those on the right and those on the left should welcome such leadership from the middle in

theological conversations, because if some form of separation occurs, it is they who will ultimately define where (and to some extent how) the theological dividing line is to be drawn.

If the moderate voices are raised and valued in the kinds of in-depth theological conversations I am proposing, in a way that is not possible in the debate about homosexuality, we as a denomination will not only be able to name our differences more precisely, but will be able to celebrate our points of commonality more authentically. Indeed, I would suggest that an extensive process of naming our unbridgeable theological gaps will also expose our unbreakable theological bonds.

The combination of disagreement and agreement may well lead us not to consider splitting but to consider ways we might reorganize into co-denominations of sorts, separating in some ways but covenanting together in some ministries (e.g., relief aid, the publishing house, archives) and administrative programs (e.g., pension and health benefits for clergy). It would be like the Jerusalem leaders giving Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship to go to the gentiles while they went to the circumcised, but asking Paul and Barnabas nevertheless to remember the poor in their work.

I am no longer willing to define Christian unity or even Methodist connectionalism in terms of the specific form of denominational existence. So, Bill Hinson, if you are serious about getting a real conversation going about separating our denomination in order to rescue it, save me a place at the table. I am convinced that as diverse conservatives, liberals and moderates share their deepest theological concerns, we'll learn a lot about ourselves and each other, about our church and our God. And who knows what kind of Methodist Pentecost might await us at the end of the process.