

The Methodists aren't united. Can they still be a church?

A global denomination, a clash of principles, and the coming reckoning

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [November 22, 2016](#) issue



Bishop Karen Oliveto of the Mountain Sky Area of the United Methodist Church with her predecessor, Elaine Stanovsky (left), and Los Angeles Area bishop Minerva Carcaño (right). Photo courtesy of Charmaine Robledo, UMC Mountain Sky Area.

With entrenched camps miles apart on the issue of homosexuality, the United Methodist Church is careening toward a fateful choice: either split into two segments along ideological lines or radically redefine how it operates as a church. A moderate middle still hopes that the parties can somehow hang together under one

denominational banner. Much will hinge on whether an overhauled concept of church—perhaps featuring more autonomy for regional bodies, congregations, and clergy—can win broad support in the global 12.1-million-member denomination.

“This is a very fragile moment for us—in some ways a very sacred and holy moment—because we’re dealing with big stuff,” said North Dakota bishop Bruce Ough, who serves as president of the UMC’s Council of Bishops. “We’re trying to do it in a way that probably has not been done by others who have wrestled with this [issue].”

Fueling the urgency is [the election in July of Karen Oliveto](#) as the UMC’s first openly gay bishop. For conservatives, this election presents a crisis, because the church’s Book of Discipline prohibits any “self-avowed, practicing homosexual” from becoming an ordained minister. They argue that covenants among Methodists will be rendered meaningless if the church lets Oliveto become a bishop and de facto blesses in one place what it bans in another.

The election of Bishop Oliveto in the UMC’s Western Jurisdiction—which stretches from Colorado to Alaska—was no isolated event. In May, ahead of last summer’s quadrennial General Conference in Portland, Oregon, more than 140 Methodist clergy identified themselves as LGBT. Another 820 pledged a willingness to break church rules by performing same-sex wedding ceremonies. Several annual conferences (regional bodies) have moved to create processes for ordaining gay candidates for ministry. Such activism is not likely to end for those who see the movement as a necessary pursuit of justice.

“We’re living out the gospel as people are marrying LGBT people and more [LGBT persons] are getting ordained,” said Matt Berryman, executive director of the Reconciling Ministries Network, which advocates for same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBT people in the UMC. “We’re not going to change, we’re not going to leave, and we’re going to keep doing more of the same.”

Moments of reckoning loom on the horizon. At the request of the South Central Jurisdiction, a Judicial Council hearing on Bishop Oliveto’s election is scheduled to be held next spring. The Council of Bishops’ executive committee had requested an expedited ruling from the Judicial Council, but that request was denied. The bishops’ request revealed, however, their sense that church policy urgently needs to be clarified.

The nine-member Judicial Council includes five new members, so it is difficult to predict what its ruling will be. The panel's leanings could come into focus this fall as it takes up cases involving openly gay candidates for ordination in the Northern Illinois and New York Annual Conferences. Its ruling on Oliveto could prompt the church to act decisively on an issue that's been debated for decades at General Conferences.

"Nobody is going to be surprised if the church courts say [Bishop Oliveto] has to be removed," said Ted Campbell, a historian at Southern Methodist University who's been calling for more local and regional autonomy to allow for gay weddings and ordinations in some parts of the church. "But that's the point at which I would say there's likely to be a big explosion"—a widespread demand that the church finally resolve the issue one way or the other.

But the church isn't waiting for an ecclesiastical court to decide the matter. This fall, a 29-member Commission on the Way Forward will take up the task of crafting a proposal that can win enough churchwide support to be adopted at the next General Conference, scheduled for 2020. Some conservative activists are among those calling for a special General Conference to meet sooner—in 2018. For that scenario to play out, however, the commission would need to issue proposals by spring 2017 with the confidence that they have a realistic shot at being approved at a 2018 conference.

"If we come to a called General Conference and do not have a proposal that can pass, the church will be in utter chaos," said Rob Renfroe, a Texas pastor and president of Good News, a conservative renewal movement in the UMC. In that event, the bishops "will have lost all leadership credibility within the church."

Options before the commission fall into three main categories: enforce the rules, restructure the church, or let opposing parties within the church go their own ways. Discerning what Methodists will find acceptable and practical may be as crucial as any theological argument.

Option one would take the form of saying that existing bans on the ordination of gay persons and on same-sex marriage rites must be enforced across the church. A proposal of this sort could provide a structural apparatus to ensure accountability. Such an approach would satisfy conservatives, such as the ones who [gathered October 7 in Chicago to form the Wesleyan Covenant Association](#).

But few observers think Methodists would have the stomach for an approach that would involve expelling fellow Methodists or pressuring those who don't conform to leave.

"Our preferred option is that we maintain the position that we have voted in every four years for 44 years, and that our bishops enforce it," Renfroe said. "But we have a new reality now, where broad areas of the church are unwilling to live by our policy."

Option two is to restructure the church to allow for greater diversity of belief and practice on issues of homosexuality. A precedent here could be found in the UMC's African churches, which have considerable latitude in allowing for local cultural expressions of the faith. But conservatives, including many of 4.9 million members of the UMC who live outside the United States, successfully blocked plans for so-called local options from reaching the General Conference floor for a vote last summer. Whether that resistance remains strong or softens in coming months could be key to whether the UMC holds together or breaks apart. The Wesleyan Covenant Association warned that a "plan that requires traditionalists to compromise their principles and understanding of scripture, including any form of the 'local option' around ordination and marriage, will not be acceptable."

One proposal that failed to gain traction at General Conference but could resurface in the work of the commission would let clergy themselves decide whether to officiate at same-sex weddings. The idea, originally offered by megachurch pastor Adam Hamilton of Kansas, would also let annual conferences decide for themselves whether to ordain openly gay candidates. This option might keep the UMC intact.

If the commission has any bias at this point, it is to preserve the unity of the denomination, according to Ough, who chairs the Council of Bishops executive committee, which nominated the 29 members of the commission. (The commission includes eight bishops, 13 clergy, and eight laypeople.) This plan could potentially win support from progressives who see it as a step—however incomplete—toward full inclusion for LGBT people in the church.

"The job won't be done until the humanity of LGBTQ people is recognized all around the world," said Berryman of the Reconciling Ministries Network. "But we realize we are on a journey, and we make incremental moves toward equality."

For any plan to pass, however, it's going to need broad support from conservative evangelicals. For decades, they've had sufficient numbers to sustain the church's official stance against homosexuality. Their ranks are multiplying, especially in Africa, home to 4.7 million UMC members, which is on track to become the global hub of United Methodism within a few years. Conservatives are squeamish about creating a church with a patchwork of beliefs and practices, which to them would represent a watered-down and inconsistent witness to the gospel.

"A plan that requires traditionalists to compromise their principles and their understandings of scripture, or that allows for varieties of beliefs and practices within the global communion of the church, isn't acceptable to most evangelicals," said Jeff Greenway, lead pastor of Reynoldsburg United Methodist Church in Ohio and a member of the Wesleyan Covenant Association's board of directors. For many conservatives, a church that's of two minds on sexual ethics might not be one worth preserving, especially since progressives regard the local option as a stepping-stone to eventual churchwide support for same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBT people.

Option three would also restructure the church to preserve unity, but it would effectively divide the church into a progressive wing and a conservative wing. Jurisdictions that currently reflect geographic regions could be reconstituted along nongeographic lines to reflect stances on homosexuality and other issues.

Rethinking the nature of the Methodist episcopate is also on the table, according to Bishop Ough, and it could be necessary in the so-called "jurisdictional option" which Chris Ritter proposed ahead of last summer's General Conference. But Ritter has acknowledged that Oliveto's election complicates the situation and makes an amicable realignment more difficult to achieve.

Activists on both sides say they could live with a separation agreement that enables congregations to take local assets, including real estate, with them. Such terms would aim to prevent the types of lawsuits that have plagued other mainline Protestant denominations in recent years. That strategy could spell relief from what's been a bruising, multidecade culture war within the denomination. Activists say bishops are ready for such a move.

"When they talk to you in private, bishops tell you what they really think," Renfroe said. "Bishops are saying there's got to be some kind of structural separation. [One

bishop said] the structure of the church coming out of this commission will be so different from what we have today that ten years ago it would have been referred to as schism.”

Bishop Ough said, “If the commission would get to the place where it said, ‘the only way we can maximize our missional impact is that we go some separate ways,’ then I don’t think we at the Council of Bishops would say that we refuse to listen to that.”

A complete division of the UMC into two distinct churches would be far from easy and is not immediately on the table. Something resembling that might occur under the umbrella of the United Methodist Church name—in which case the umbrella church might amount to little more than some shared services, such as a publishing house and pension management. But a large moderate middle wants to maintain unity in some form and might accept trade-offs to get it. Neither camp wants to leave the UMC, and neither feels pressure to bow to such an outcome.

“Whoever leaves, it’s like you’re the loser,” Renfroe said. “You leave the church name, the church structure, and the church assets with the other group.”

Progressives should be free to leave and take property with them if they wish, Renfroe said, but he expects they’ll want to stay because they want to change the church.

Indeed, staying put is the progressives’ plan. They believe their movement is catching fire. So if anyone were to leave, in their view it should be evangelicals who’re disgruntled by the wave of support for LGBT issues.

“The energy to leave is not coming from progressives,” Berryman said. “The energy to leave comes from the grassroots of the conservative movement in the denomination because it’s not behaving according to the rules they like.”

But conservatives say they have no intention of jumping ship. After all, they argue, they’ve long supported the denomination’s unwavering stance forbidding same-sex marriage and the ordination of people who are self-avowed, practicing homosexuals. They have no problem abiding by the church’s covenants, they say, and therefore shouldn’t be pushed out, especially when conservatives are gaining clout in the church as global demographic trends play out. The UMC is declining fastest in the American Northwest and Northeast, where progressive attitudes hold sway. It is growing fastest in Africa—the Africa Central Conference has grown more than 300

percent over the past decade.

Amid so much uncertainty, stakeholders are positioning themselves for a future in which voluntary affiliations and partnerships might define what it means to be United Methodist. The Wesleyan Covenant Association intends not to launch a new denomination but to facilitate collaboration among like-minded, orthodox Methodists, according to Greenway.

Meanwhile, church agencies have already rebranded themselves so as to drop denominational ties in their names. The General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits has become Wespath Benefits and Investments, and the General Board of Discipleship has become Discipleship Ministries. Such rebranding could make it easier for Methodist groups to forge voluntary partnerships within a new, more autonomous framework.

United Methodists are girding for old structures to give way to ones that reflect a revamped understanding of what it means to be church. When this chapter ends, they could find themselves more federated than united. At least for now, unity remains the hope, even if the unity preserved will mean something different from what it has meant for the past half century.

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