

“When the Church is Divided”

[1 Corinthians 1:10](#)

In all kinds of human relationships, conflict is inevitable. Actually, conflict is a normal part of any healthy relationship. In marriage and family, at school and work places, in a nation and among peoples, conflict arises whenever people disagree or argue over something - with different ideas and opinions, different interests and needs, different beliefs and principles. When it is properly addressed and handled instead of being ignored or avoided, conflict can renew and strengthen relationships.

As a human institution, the church is not immune to conflict. Today’s scripture reading indicates that conflict existed even in its early stages. In his first letter to the Corinthian Church, right after his greeting, the apostle Paul addresses the problem of division among its members and urges them “to be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” There were 4 different factions, divided basically on the basis of loyalty to different leaders of the church. Each of the first three groups claimed Paul, Apollos, or Cephas as their leader.

Paul was the founder of the Corinthian Church. During his second missionary journey, Paul stayed in the city for a year and a half and worked hard to get the new church off the ground. Apollos was an Alexandrian Jew and eloquent speaker, well-versed in the scriptures. Cephas, another name for Peter, was an eyewitness to Jesus’ ministry and the leader of his 12 disciples. Then, there was another group of church members who claimed not to follow any man but Jesus Christ. Paul was probably rebuking this group because they considered themselves to be more spiritual than other believers on the grounds that they alone were following the ultimate source of authority.

Despite the Apostle Paul’s heartfelt plea for unity among Christians believers, throughout its history, the church has witnessed countless conflicts, both large and small. Sometimes, conflict led the church to become united. But more often, it has led to bad divides and polarization. In the relatively recent history, the church has experienced schism over issues of slavery and racism, and today it continues to struggle with issues of sexism, immigration, and homosexuality.

This past week, the decision of the special session of the General Conference, which is the top decision making body of our denomination, revealed that the United Methodist Church is not united but divided. After three days of intense debates, a majority of the 864 delegates from the US and overseas approved the Traditional Plan by a very close margin. It was a result that was supported and orchestrated by a group called Wesleyan Covenant Association, which represents the voice of the conservative United Methodists, or so-called traditionalists.

The decision of our denomination’s top legislative body was a huge disappointment to many United Methodists. Deep hurt has been felt across the global church and certainly within our annual conference and jurisdiction. The majority of the denominational leaders in the US, including the Council of Bishops, had supported the One Church Plan. It would have allowed all clergy, local churches, and annual conferences to make their own decisions on ordaining LGBTQ clergy and conducting same-sex marriages. It would have made our denomination more inclusive and welcoming, and kept us together. But, the General Conference approved the Traditional Plan, instead.

In summary, here is what the Traditional Plan does:

- Not only reaffirms what is already in the Book of Discipline that the “practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching,” but also places additional restrictions on clergy in their ministry to and with LGBTQ persons and their loved ones;
- Condemns same-sex marriage and adds mandatory penalties on clergy who officiate at same-sex weddings. Pastors who violate the rule and are convicted by trial will be suspended without pay for a year and be required to surrender their credentials upon a second offense;
- Requires the members of the Board of Ordained Ministry to promise that they will obey all the rules related to homosexuality.
- Prohibits Bishops from commissioning or ordaining LGBTQ persons and requires them to dismiss complaints only for reasons of law or fact. Bishops also will be subjected to penalties for disobeying the rule.

As you can see, the Traditional Plan is not a way forward plan but a way backwards. It positions us to move backwards while our society is moving forward on the issues of homosexuality and same-sex marriage. In June of 2015, same-sex marriage became legal in all 50 states of America by a ruling of the Supreme Court. The landmark ruling came after decades of steadily rising public support for gay marriage. In the same year, national support rose to 60% for the first time. According to a Gallup Poll that was published in June last year, 67% or two thirds of Americans support same-sex marriage, while only 31% oppose such a union. And the number is much bigger for younger generations. Three out of four millennials say they support gay marriage.

Of course, we, the church do not make our decisions on matters of faith based on polling results or posts on social media. We decide what’s right and wrong based on what the Bible says because it is the primary source for our faith and practice. Yet, we do not read the Bible and take every word in it literally. Instead, as John Wesley, the founder of Methodism instructed us, we interpret the scripture through the lenses of tradition and experience, and also using God’s gift of reason.

So, today, we do not keep the dietary restrictions that scripture clearly says we should maintain. We do not use rods to discipline our children, though scripture says again and again we should. We do not practice polygamy, though our ancestors of faith had many wives. No one is asked to give up his or her possessions to be a follower of Jesus Christ, though he said so. And here is a list of things the apostle Paul said that are in conflict with our culture and society - women should not wear jewelry; women should cover their heads when praying; women should not teach men but be silent in the church; slaves should be obedient to their masters. Well, look around us! Look at me! Another area that Paul is in conflict with our times is when he talks about same-sex acts.

Supporters of the Traditional Plan say their plan is grounded in the Bible. Apparently, they read Paul’s words and other Bible verses about same-sex acts literally and refuse to interpret them, which is not what they do for other parts of scripture that they find to be unreasonable.

The General Conference's decision this past week is a great loss to the whole United Methodist Church family. It has hurt the LGBTQ community and their family and friends. It has made many United Methodists and churches in the US feel angry and hurt. It has alienated young clergy and seminary students who favor full inclusion of LGBTQ persons in the life of the church. Because of the message this action sends out to the world, it will be harder for us to reach new people with the good news of the gospel, especially younger generations, our children, grandchildren who cannot imagine a church that treats their LGBTQ friends as second-class Christians.

So, what do we do in such a time like this? We remain committed to our Wesleyan tradition. We remain committed to our theological and cultural diversity with churches that are conservative, moderate, and progressive. At Campbell UMC, we remain committed to full inclusion of our LGBTQIA siblings. United in the love of God through Jesus Christ our Lord, we remain committed to our mission and ministry: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Long ago, the prophet Isaiah said to the Israelites on behalf of God, "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." God still speaks to us today through the prophet. A new thing is happening in the life of our denomination. Though we do not see it yet, we know it will be beautiful, rainbow-colored. And, we hope and pray that we will soon be able to see it clearly through the eyes of faith.

In closing, I invite you to watch this [video message from the bishops](#) of the Western Jurisdiction of which we are a part. Let's take a look.