

WeConfess



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Can A Call For An Orderly Departure Really Work?



Dr. William Abraham

Distinguished theologian, Dr. Billy Abraham, recently called for a “Mexit;” an orderly departure from The United Methodist Church for those who do not agree with the church’s position on marriage and issues related to human sexuality. According to Dr. Abraham:

“the first item of business in tackling the issues around disagreement and disunity in United Meth-

odism is to speak truthfully about our current crisis. The crisis is not one of how we can maintain organic unity in the midst of disagreement. The crisis is the breakdown of the bonds of unity; the relevant question facing the church is what to do about this. To treat the problem as one of how to maintain unity across our disagreements is to mask the deeper reality that has to be faced. Certain units and provinces of the kingdom of United Methodism have decided to walk alone rather than together. Now the General Conference must sort out what to do in response.

It is both common and natural to reject this alternative analysis and to frame the issue as simply the problem of securing unity in the midst of disagreement. It is not difficult to see the attraction of this way of thinking. If we are driven to explicit division then we all know that the consequences will be radical and long-lasting. Think for a moment of what it might mean for our seminaries, colleges, and universities. A whole raft of legal and ecclesial changes would ensue that would be abruptly out of control. Or think of the impact on a host of local churches. Many would be torn apart at the seams if decisions have to be made on what group to join.”

Dr. Abraham is currently the Albert Cook Outler Professor of Wesley Studies at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, TX. He has served on The Confessing Movement Board of Directors and has made great contributions to church renewal. He has written a paper that examines what he believes to be the factors that have caused the current disagreement and disunity in The United Methodist Church followed by his recommendations for a way forward. Following are some excerpts from that analysis:

- *“We have now reached the point in our ecclesial deliberations where it is implausible to think that any new arguments or information is going to make any significant difference to where the various protagonists stand on the contested issues before us.”*
- *“To use an analogy that Wesley used for the breakdown of his marriage, the water has been spilt and it is no longer possible to gather it up again. As many have noted, the covenant of commitment to the teaching and practices of the church as a whole has broken down.”*

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- *“So the real issue to be faced is what to do now that disunity is already a reality. If we want to speak of disagreement, then disagreement centers on how we should deal with the disunity that already exists in our midst.”*
- *“Put differently, we have reached a fork in the road that has already been crossed and cannot be undone by verbal fiat.”*
- *“We are now in a position to take up again the real options that have to be faced if we are to come to terms with the crisis before us. We are already well into a journey in which a minority, for better or worse, no longer consider the decisions of General Conference as binding. New facts have been created on the ground with the election of Bishop Oliveto and other ecclesial decisions and actions. There is no need to indulge in some kind of adolescent moral handwringing about this development. It is what it is; folk can evaluate Bishop Oliveto as a heretic or a prophet; in their own context such evaluations are no mere casual affairs. The crucial observation to make is not so much moral as ecclesiological. We now have a breach within the church which de facto amounts to disunity not just in name but in reality. Exactly the same would have to be said were we to have a network of ‘evangelicals’ or ‘conservatives’ defy systematically in practice the decisions of General Conference.”*
- *“Let me cut to the chase at this point. I think that the way ahead lies with an exit plan for those who cannot accept the canonical teaching and practice of the church rather than a plan for division.”*
- *“Interestingly, John Wesley is very clear that church unity is not a non-negotiable or absolute commitment. I agree with Wesley on this score. There are circumstances in which division is the least bad option before us.”*
- *“So why do I recommend an exit for those United Methodists who cannot abide by the canonical teaching and practice of The United Methodist Church?... Clearly this way of moving forward would be preferable to the disruption caused by formal division where votes would have to be taken across the whole denomination. In case of exit we work with the default position of keeping as much as possible the way it is for now. Those exiting would be treated fairly as far as property and assets are concerned.” “There is no problem-free journey ahead, but we should surely seek to cause as little disruption as possible, so that the different expressions of United Methodism can immediately implement their own vision of doctrine, discipline, and ministry.”*
- *“Surely, it is a matter of basic moral integrity that those who disagree with the teachings and practices of the church should follow through on their own convictions and recognize the moral obligation of exiting The United Methodist Church.”*
- *“The relevant point is that the debate is now over; The United Methodist Church has stood firm across the years; there is not going to be a change of mind and heart.”*
- *“It is also time for those who dissent to acknowledge the moral integrity involved in walking alone and creating their own institutions and practices.”*

In summary, Dr. Abraham closes with these thoughts:

“We should take seriously the option of a Mexit, the exit of those who cannot abide by the conciliar teachings and practices of United Methodism. Whether this means the creation of one or two new Methodist bodies in which to house their vision of the Wesleyan tradition is up to those who refuse to abide by the teaching and practice of the church. Those who have already decided to walk alone should be given the opportunity and freedom to follow their convictions in their new edition of Methodism. Equally, those who support the canonical teaching of The United Methodist Church should be given the freedom to uphold and implement their convictions. As we move forward we should seek to be as least disruptive as possible. We can leave the rest to history and the providence of God. The only serious and realistic alternative is to prepare for division.”

(Excerpts reprinted with permission)

Is It Legal for a Self-avowed Practicing Homosexual or a Spouse in a Same-sex Marriage or Civil Union to Act as a Bishop of The United Methodist Church?

Judicial Council Decision 1341

As you may already know, the Judicial Council upheld church law in response to the Western Jurisdiction's consecration of an openly lesbian bishop in a same-sex marriage, Karen Oliveto. Judicial Council Decision 1341 states that *"It is not lawful for the college of bishops of any jurisdictional or central conference to consecrate a self-avowed practicing homosexual bishop."* It further asserts that *"Self-avowal does not nullify the consecration and cause removal from episcopal office but is a sufficient declaration to subject the bishop's ministerial office to review."* It will be up to the Western Jurisdiction to provide fair and due process per the constitution of the United Methodist Church. Until the review process is complete, Oliveto will remain in office and in good standing. In addition to Bishop Oliveto, all clergy and bishops who participated in the nomination, election and consecration may be charged with disobedience. Unfortunately, the Western Jurisdiction has historically been unwilling to abide by church law as it relates to issues of human sexuality. Although they may attempt to prolong the process, the complaint process has finite time parameters that will require a decision by the Western Jurisdiction before the 2019 Special Called General Conference. The Judicial Council's ruling has effectively left them with only two options; Bishop Oliveto's removal from office and revocation of credentials or for the Western Jurisdiction to commit direct disobedience.

JC Asked to Rule Whether An Untitled Resolution Passed by the NEJ Is In Order

Judicial Council Decision 1340

During a July 2016 plenary session of the Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference, the following language was part of a resolution that passed by a 111 to 53 vote:

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED: The Northeastern Jurisdiction hereby requests of all CFA's of the Annual Conferences of the jurisdiction to state that there are no funds available for initiating of investigations and trials based upon the sexual orientation or marital status of faithful United Methodists or involving clergy for conducting same-sex weddings and will promote the evangelistic, educational, missionary and benevolent interests of the church.

Bishop Mark J. Webb requested a decision of law from the Judicial Council to determine if the resolution passed was in order considering multiple paragraphs in the Discipline and previous Judicial Council Rulings he deemed contrary to the language therein. The Judicial Council's Decision 1340 reads as follows:

Jurisdictional conferences are free to adopt resolutions that are aspirational in nature, and to express their ideals and opinions so long as they do not attempt to negate, ignore, or contradict The Book of Discipline, 2012. They may not pass resolutions that encourage a violation of Church law or discourage the enforcement of Church law. The Untitled Resolution adopted by the Northeastern Jurisdictional Conference is contrary to the Constitution and The Discipline and, therefore, null and void. The bishop's Decision of Law is affirmed.



Can a Board of Ordained Ministry Ignore A Candidate's Violation of the Church's Fidelity and Celibacy Standard?

Judicial Council Decision 1344

A petition by Rev. Scott Field asserted that the June 5, 2016 Clergy Session of the Northern Illinois Conference attempted to circumvent existing church law by voting to “refuse to direct the Northern Illinois Annual Conference Board of Ordained Ministry to inquire of candidates for licensing, commissioning, or ordination whether or not they in fact meet the referenced disciplinary requirements.” The clergy session action was an effort to allow homosexual candidates to be considered for ordination. Field also noted that the Northern Illinois Conference website stated they “publicly affirm that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and straight candidates will be given equal consideration and protection in the candidacy process. Sexual orientation and gender identity are not and will not be considered in the evaluation of candidates by the Board of Ordained Ministry of the Northern Illinois Conference.” A request for a decision regarding this action was heard by the Judicial Council on April 28, 2017.

Decision No. 1344 addressed the following two questions:

1. Is the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry required to ascertain whether a candidate meets the qualifications for candidacy and ordained ministry, including whether or not she or he is exhibiting “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness” or is a self-avowed practicing homosexual?
2. Can the Board legally recommend to the clergy session a candidate whom they believe to be a self-avowed practicing homosexual or otherwise in violation of the fidelity and celibacy standard?

Decision

The Board of Ordained Ministry [hereinafter Board] is mandated by *The Book of Discipline, 2012* to examine all applicants as to their fitness for the ordained ministry, and make full inquiry as to the fitness of the candidate for: (1) annual election to local pastor, (2) election to associate membership (3) election to provisional membership, (4) election to full conference membership ¶ 635.2(h). The Board’s examination must include all paragraphs relevant to election of pastoral ministry, including those provisions set forth in paragraphs that deal with issues of race, gender, sexuality, integrity, indebtedness, etc. ¶¶ 304.2, 305, 306, 310. Candidates for licensed or ordained ministry in the United Methodist Church should be treated fairly and denial of entry must be based upon the evidence received from the results of the full examination. The bishop’s decision of law is modified.

Judicial Council Decision 1343

Similarly, the Judicial Council was asked to review a Bishop’s Decision of Law in the New York Annual Conference that asserted, in part, that “the Board of Ordained Ministry is not required to ‘ascertain’ whether a candidate meets the qualifications for candidacy and ordained ministry, including whether or not she or he is exhibiting “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness” or is a “self-avowed practicing homosexual.”

A request for a ruling was submitted by Steven M. Knutsen as to whether or not this action was in order. The Judicial Council’s Decision 1343 reads as follows:

The Board of Ordained Ministry [hereinafter Board] is mandated by *The Book of Discipline, 2012* to examine all applicants as to their fitness for the ordained ministry, and make full inquiry as to the fitness of the candidate for: (1) annual election to local pastor, (2) election to associate membership (3) election to provisional membership, (4) election to full conference membership ¶ 635.2(h). The Board’s examination must include all paragraphs relevant to election of pastoral ministry, including those provisions set forth in paragraphs that deal with issues of race, gender, sexuality, integrity, indebtedness, etc. ¶¶ 304.2, 305, 306, 310. Candidates for licensed or ordained ministry in the United Methodist Church should be treated fairly and denial of entry must be based upon the evidence received from the results of the full examination. The bishop’s decision of law is modified.

Existing Models of Wesleyan Unity

Blog by Bishop Scott Jones



Bishop Scott Jones

On his website www.ExtremeCenter.com, Bishop Scott Jones of the Texas Conference calls on United Methodists to consider options other than unity or split. He refers to the vision statement of the Commission on a Way Forward which calls for “as much unity as possible.” Jones suggests that “A good starting place is to consider the four forms of unity we already practice: full communion, the World Methodist Council, affiliated autonomous churches and pan-Methodist churches.”

The following breakdown is taken from Bishop Jones’ blog “Existing Models of Wesleyan Unity:”

Full communion

Paragraph 431.1(b) describes full communion as one that exists between two or more Christian churches that recognize each other as genuine churches, recognize the authenticity of each other’s sacraments, affirm the authenticity of each other’s ministry and recognize the validity of each other’s offices of ministry. We are in full communion, for example, with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Such relationships allow for shared sacraments, easier exchange of ministers and stronger missional cooperation.

World Methodist Council

This body includes many denominations in the Wesleyan family. They have a shared doctrinal statement and engage in cooperative work around evangelism and ecumenical dialogue. A major conference is held every 5 years for mutual learning and the building of relationships.

Affiliated Autonomous

Many churches in Latin America and Asia have the status of “affiliated autonomous church” recognizing they once were part of the UMC or its predecessors and have now become self-governing. Our General Board of Global Ministries has strong relationships with these daughter churches, including the placing of a regional office in Seoul, Korea.

Pan-Methodist

We have a close relationship with five other US churches which are predominantly Africa-American. The six denominations are all self-governing, but we share (for the most part) similar doctrines and episcopal governance structures. The bishops of the churches meet together every other year and there is a commission governing cooperating work. We are engaged currently in a Campaign for Children in Poverty.

Vehicles of Shared Ministry

It is important to understand that three of our general agencies are empowered to have significant missional relationships to embody these other forms of unity. The General Board of Pensions could provide pension management to any church associated with the UMC if the Board approves. The United Methodist Publishing House is already providing services to other denominations. The General Board of Global Ministries works with many partners, especially affiliated autonomous churches, to accomplish our ministry.



5 Proposed Constitutional Amendments Up For Ratification At Annual Conferences

5 proposed constitutional amendments to the United Methodist Constitution garnered the necessary two thirds vote at General Conference in May of 2016 to send the proposed amendments to Annual Conferences for ratification. For these amendments to become part of the constitution, a minimum of two thirds of ALL voters from ALL annual conferences across the connection would need to vote in favor.

The Renewal and Reform Coalition, of which The Confessing Movement is a part, has released the following summary of the 5 proposed amendments and our collective position on each.

Amendment 1 – Add a new paragraph on Gender Justice

The Coalition takes **no position** on this amendment

Positives

Strong statement in favor of the equal value of women and men in God’s eyes, which we support

Strong commitment on behalf of the church to seek to eliminate discrimination against women and girls, which we support

Negatives

This statement reads more like a Social Principle than a paragraph in the Constitution, particularly with its emphasis on theology. We question whether it belongs in the Constitution.

The second sentence raises theological concerns when it says, “it is contrary to Scripture and to logic to say that God is male or female ... maleness and femaleness are ... not characteristics of the divine.” Does this mean Jesus is not male? Or does it mean that Jesus, who is obviously male, is not divine? Either position is contrary to our doctrinal standards.

This language could potentially be used to discourage use of references to God as Father (e.g., hymns, prayers, creeds)

Summary – While this statement is well-intentioned, and we support its strong emphasis on the equality of women, we are concerned with its theological fuzziness being written into our Constitution. The church’s advocacy for women’s equality is well-stated elsewhere in the *Book of Discipline*.

Amendment 2 – Add to ¶4 on Inclusiveness “ability, gender, age, marital status”

The Coalition takes **no position** on this amendment

Positives

- We support the idea that persons of any ability should be welcome in our churches and included in the church’s life, worship, and governance.
- We support the idea that both men and women equally should be welcome in our ministries and included equally in the church’s life, worship, and governance.
- We support the idea that persons of every age should be welcome in our churches and included in age-appropriate ways in the church’s life, worship, and governance.
- We support the idea that single, married, widowed, and divorced persons should be welcome in our churches and included in the church’s life, worship, and governance.



Negatives

- The word “gender” is no longer understood to be merely a binary (male/female) term. It has recently become a loaded word in Western culture and carries within it connotations of transgender, gender queer, and other perceptions of gender that we do not believe should be granted blanket and unconditional inclusion in the Constitution.
- We are concerned that adding “marital status” without defining the term could be interpreted to give a mandate in our constitution to recognize same-sex marriage or polygamy in those countries that allow such. The current definition of marriage in the Social Principles could be nullified by this Constitutional language.
- The inclusion of “age” could result in the elimination of mandatory retirement for bishops and clergy. There was no discussion of this possibility at General Conference, and we are concerned that this could be an unintended consequence of adopting this amendment. If we are to eliminate mandatory retirement, it should at least be discussed and considered by the General Conference delegates before being approved.

Summary – While in sympathy with the intentions of the proposed additions, we are concerned about potential unintended consequences of adopting this amendment as presently worded. We encourage careful consideration of the issues involved before adopting this amendment. We would hope to support better wording in the future that could accomplish the purposes in a clearer and less controversial way.

Amendment #3 – Election of Delegates by Majority, Requiring Floor Nominations

The Coalition supports this amendment.

This amendment would standardize the process for election of delegates across annual conferences and would foster a more open and transparent democratic process in places where that is not a tradition. The requirement for a majority could cause voters to coalesce more quickly around the top candidates. The requirement for floor nominations enables maximum openness and access of all qualified persons to the process of running for delegate. It addresses problems that have been experienced in some annual conferences.

Amendment #4 – Requires Central Conferences to Elect Bishops at a Regularly Scheduled Conference

The Coalition supports this amendment.

This amendment would ensure that the dates of central conference meetings are not manipulated to allow irregular processes for electing bishops. It addresses problems that have been experienced in some central conferences.

Amendment #5 – Allows the Council of Bishops to Hold Bishops Accountable

The Coalition supports this amendment.

This amendment is a key part of enhancing the global accountability of bishops. It gives the Council of Bishops the option to supervise complaints against bishops when the jurisdictional or central conference complaint process does not work appropriately. It addresses problems that have been experienced in several regions of the global church.

YOU CAN INFLUENCE THE NEXT GENERAL CONFERENCE...NOW!!

The Special Called General Conference in 2019 represents a critical turning point for the UMC...either we will follow the other mainline denominations into terminal decline or we will chart a new direction of fidelity to Scripture and Wesleyan theology. The Confessing Movement is preparing even now to have a maximum influence. Your help is critical in terms of prayer and contributions. For directions on contributing, just call our office at 317-356-9729, or go to our website at www.confessingumc.org and click on “donate.” Thanks so much!!

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Purpose Statement

**Confessing Jesus Christ as Son, Savior, and Lord.
The Confessing Movement exists to enable The United
Methodist Church to retrieve its classical doctrinal identity,
and to live it out as disciples of Jesus Christ.**

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