Monday, May 13, 2024 / Separation of church and church

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

NOEL KING (host): Back in 2019, the Methodist Church met to vote on the inclusion of LGBT members.

SCORING <Scanning the Horizon - NO DRONES>

*<CLIP> TODAY EXPLAINED SR FACT CHECKER LAURA BULLARD: The Methodists are thinking: we have gays. We have a gay issue. We have queer people who are trying to get ordained. We have clergy trying to perform same-sex marriages. The problem is none of this is, is technically allowed.*

NOEL: The voting didn’t go great.

*<CLIP> UMC PASTOR JOELLE HINEMAN: The LGBT observers were locked out of the room, and as the vote was happening, you could hear their fists pounding on the doors.*

NOEL: But that vote – which was to CONTINUE excluding gay members – only narrowly passed. And about twenty five percent of the more conservative US congregations saw the writing on the wall and they left the denomination.

Then, earlier this month, the Methodists voted on this question again. And Today, Explained was there: for the debates, for the songs, and for the results. And we’re gonna tell you what went down, comin’ up next.

[THEME]

*<CLIP> ENGINEER DAVID HERMAN: This is Today, Explained.*

NOEL: Laura, go ahead, give me your full name and tell me what you do.

LAURA BULLARD (*Today, Explained* senior fact-checker): Uh, so my full name is Laura Bullard, and I am the senior fact checker here at Today, Explained.

NOEL: So today, you have migrated to behind the mic. What, um… what are we talkin’ about?

LAURA: Well, Noel, this is a story that I find particularly interesting because I am a person who loves church. I love faith communities. I love people of faith, the shared language, the rituals. I just, like, generally think it's a really beautiful thing to organize a life around. I am not personally in a faith community, and one of the reasons for this is I grew up in a faith community that would not have affirmed my marriage. And this is because, um… and I don't know if I've told you this or not, but I'm actually… Noel, I'm gay.

NOEL: <laughs, gasps> Not you.

LAURA: So the UMC, the United Methodist Church. This is the largest mainline Protestant denomination in the United States, and they've been having a lot of conversations around this idea of inclusion. They're talking about whether or not to include gays, basically. What they call “self-avowed practicing homosexuals.”

NOEL: Oh.

LAURA: So this story is something I've been paying attention to for a while. And this year they're set to make, like, a lot of major decisions specifically involving these issues of inclusion. So basically, I just told our boss that either y'all can send me to talk to the Methodists…

NOEL: <laughs>

LAURA: … or I'm going to need a week off for vacation because I'm planning on watching this go down one way or another.

NOEL: I will be going to the Methodist conference. All right, so: the point of this conference is to have a debate over which direction the Methodist church is going to move in – more progressive, more conservative. What did this look like as the members were deliberating?

LAURA: Okay, so a few things to know. At this conference, I learned three things about the Methodists. One, they are nice. Shockingly nice. They were helping me fix my outfit.

*<CLIP> METHODIST: Do you want your collar in or out?  
 LAURA: Is it – Is it in or out?  
 METHODIST: This one's in, this one's out.  
 LAURA: Oh, no! I'm glad I asked you about my outfit.*

*ANOTHER METHODIST: See, here’s the thing: It's like I'm here. It's like a mullet, you know. Party in the front. Business in the back.*

LAURA: One woman gave me directions one morning, and these directions ended up being wrong. The next day, she found me and apologized.

*<CLIP> METHODIST: You walked in yesterday, and I sent you to the wrong desk to get your pass. And it's just been on my mind, so I apologize. <fade down>   
LAURA: Um, don’t worry about it.*

LAURA: So, two: They love to break out in song.

*<CLIP> METHODIST SONG: Hallelujah! Amen! Amen! Amen! x 800 <under>*

LAURA: And three, the actual process of General Conference, the way the votes happen, the way it looks, is methodical.

NOEL: Ah! <gasp> Well done!

LAURA: Um. You could probably also say it is tedious.

NOEL: <laughs>

LAURA: It is really confusing. It's a little boring. The basic idea is, imagine you've got a thousand people in the same Google doc.

SCORING <Nosy Neighbor>

LAURA: So we've got hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of Methodists, and they're sort of live editing their rules and stances in real time. So we've got debates, we've got amendments, we've got debates about amendments.

*<CLIP> INTREPID IOWAN: Does adding the word ‘and’ rather than ‘or’ make it so that marriage would be between a man, a woman, AND also* *two other consenting adults?  
SOMEONE IN THE CROWD: That’s what it sounds like–   
IOWAN: Cuz I don’t think that’s the intention.*

LAURA: We have a lot of voting….

*<CLIP> GENEROUS METHODIST: We were voting now to close the debate on the amendment. The amendment to the amendment and the original motion.*

LAURA: So at the conference, it becomes pretty clear early on that the progressives basically have a supermajority. They're getting everything that they want passed.

NOEL: Oh!

LAURA: At the close of deliberations anywhere you walk is essentially a Methodist takeover. So my first night there, it's been exciting. I decide to go to a bar. They're having a trivia night. My thought is, I'm going to get there and talk to some Methodist seminarians. It turns out that no one was available to talk because they were fully, fully locked in to what was happening. And this is because I had actually walked into a *Methodist* trivia night.

*<CLIP> EMCEE: In 1735, John Wesley spent just over two years in what colony?*

LAURA: This was not just a trivia night that Methodists attended. This was actually, this was Methodist trivia.

*<CLIP> EMCEE: Georgiaaaaa! Good.  
 SOMEONE IN THE CROWD: Yeeeeeehaw!*

LAURA: So I knew a big vote was supposed to happen the next morning. So I paid my tab and I conducted my only interview:

*<CLIP> LAURA: Do you regularly host church trivia?  
BARTENDER: No.   
LAURA: No.  
BARTENDER: <giggles>*

SCORING OUT

LAURA: So the next morning, things really kick off. We're eight years in the making, and the Methodists are set to make some pretty major decisions.

NOEL: And from what you've said so far, the progressive arm of the Methodist church is getting what it wants at this conference. What they're voting on is, is there going to be inclusion for avowed homosexuals? Where does this land? What is the final vote?

LAURA: It was so subtle that I actually missed it at first.

*<CLIP> ORGANIZER: The affirmative has it and the motion is adopted. The consent calendar A05 is approved as printed.*

LAURA: I didn't realize that it happened until I saw the guy from the Associated Press sprinting across the pressroom.

NOEL: Ha!

LAURA: What had happened: Basically, they'd removed this ban on the ordination of self-avowed practicing homosexuals as clergy members, and they removed the ban on clergy members performing marriages for same sex couples.

NOEL: Wow.

LAURA: The whole room changed. People start audibly sobbing. They’re out of their seats, they’re walking around the rooms.

*<CLIP> ORGANIZER: Can we please hold?*

LAURA: We did get chastened.

*<CLIP> ORGANIZER: Please hold our excitement as we continue to work together and do our work.*

LAURA: I noticed that people wearing, you know, rainbow stoles, rainbow-patterned vestments were sort of filing out of the room. And so...

AMBI IN

LAURA: …I followed them, outside into the courtyard.

AMBI: *…just gonna hold the door…*  
LAURA: And immediately, as soon as you walked out, it was an extremely Methodist moment. They they started to do what Methodists do.

*<CLIP> METHODIST SONG: Let us rejoice!*

NOEL: Aw!

LAURA: So people are overjoyed. Overwhelmed. Lots and lots and lots of tears. For a lot of folks out there, this is like the culmination of a lifetime of work. One of those people is Reverend Doctor Israel Alvaran. And he's an elder and a clergy member from the Philippines. He is actually what they call a cradle Methodist.

MUX OUT

*<CLIP> REVEREND ISRAEL ALVARAN: I was born in the United Methodist Hospital. Okay. Baptized in the United Methodist Church and, decided to be a pastor in the United Methodist Church when I was in fifth grade.  
LAURA: What does it feel like to stay in it? Through a coming out, through – I mean, all the way up until this moment. You know.  
ALVARAN: I feel like the church is coming home. And the church embracing me and saying sorry. But now I could tell a lot of closeted friends in the Philippines, my friends here and clergy who are queer, who are still in the closet, say, ‘We are being welcomed to this church. We've always been part of it. We’re just reclaiming what we have already and being public about it.’ Yeah.*

LAURA: That was one thing that I heard over and over. Just this idea that, ‘We've – we’ve always been here.’

NOEL: Huh.

LAURA: ‘We weren't planning on leaving, and now we're allowed to be here.’

NOEL: It's this really beautiful moment and this really powerful moment. And yet I'm reminded that you told us this was a very divided conference.

LAURA: Yeah. Not everybody was thrilled. This represented a pretty major power shift in the church.

NOEL: Mm.

LAURA: I spoke with Dixie Brewster. And she is a conservative delegate from Kansas.

*<CLIP> DELEGATE DIXIE BREWSTER: All along, I've really hoped for a big tent United Methodist Church denomination where the progressives, the centrists, and the conservatives all had a place at the table. But after today in the votes, it obviously seems like there's no place at the table for the conservative view of, of traditional marriage and, and family, where a mother and father consist of the parents of a family and where those types of, of, of unions are celebrated.*

LAURA: So it's easy to imagine that this tent actually technically just got a lot bigger.

NOEL: Huh! Yeah.

LAURA: But I did hear from a lot of conservatives: ‘We feel like this is no longer a big tent congregation. We no longer have a seat at the table.’

NOEL: And so where are they going to go?

LAURA: So, we’re not 100% sure yet, and it was hard to find people who were willing to tell me their next steps on the record. But there is this new splinter congregation. It was founded when the churches first started disaffiliating in 2022, and it's called the Global Methodist Church. In terms of doctrine, it looks a lot like the UMC, but they maintain pretty strict conservative opinions when it comes to sexuality.

NOEL: You, I will remind our listeners, you made threats to be able to go to this conference. You said, ‘Let me go or I'm going to take a vacation.’ We're going to talk later in the show about how, in a very weird way, the Methodist Church represents America more than people might think. That's coming up. But, Laura, what did you take away from this? What can't you stop thinking about?

LAURA: So I've been home for a few days, and the thing I keep coming back to was this one moment that I had towards the end of my conversation, actually, with – with Dixie.

*<CLIP> DIXIE: … and I want my kids and grandkids to, to be Christian.   
LAURA: Sure.   
DIXIE: To be Christian, and to follow Jesus and to believe that we can have salvation through God's grace and, and, that, that that's what's most important.  
LAURA: Yeah. How would you feel if those kids or grandkids ended up in this Methodist church?  
DIXIE: I would be very disappointed.  
LAURA: Okay. <laughs> Just checkin’.   
<DIXIE AND LAURA LAUGH>*

SCORING <Prayer for the Living>

LAURA: And mostly I just keep thinking about how we both laughed when she said that last thing. And I keep asking myself, like, ‘Why… Why was that funny? Like, why was that funny to me?’

QUICK SPACE

LAURA: I feel like it's because for a second she was reaching for some kind of, like, higher level of grace or understanding like, ‘Okay, you might be this Methodist – Methodist this way or Methodist this way. But really, as long as we're all Christians.’

NOEL: Hmm.

LAURA: You know, and then we sort of snap back to like the political moment that we're in and then. All of a sudden, like, everything feels unfixable and absurd. And I think we both looked at each other and were like. Yeah, things are bad.

QUICK SPACE

LAURA: And I don't know, I've been thinking about, like you said throughout history, the way that the Methodist Church thinks about itself has sort of acted, like, as this really interesting mirror to the way America thinks about itself? And I just sort of think that, like, whenever this community gets to a place where they can no longer hold together as a community, that that's something that is worth paying attention to.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Laura Bullard. *Today, Explained* fact-checker and reporter and self-avowed practicing homosexual. Next up: we dig into how the Methodist Church’s fights MIRROR the country’s. And we talk about what this vote might tell us about America’s future.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

*<CLIP> GREGORIAN CHANT THEME: Toooooooooday, Explained.*

ASHLEY: I am Doctor Ashley Boggan. Um, I am the general secretary of the General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church, which I always like to say is kind of an annoyingly fancy way to say that I'm a giant Methodist history geek – or a Metho-nerd, as we prefer to be called.

NOEL: Methonerd Ashley has a theory about the Methodist church: as go the Methodists, so goes America. So if the Methodists are fighting over something, the rest of the country probably is, too.

ASHLEY: There's a really great argument to be made that if you look at Methodist history within the United States, it's a great lens for looking at American history. We were founded at the same time, within a decade of each other. We grew dealing with a lot of the same quote unquote issues – race and gender and sexuality – and trying to figure out how to grow and maintain influence and maintain relevancy within this growing and ever-complex form of society that, that is the United States and it has been the United States.

NOEL: Ashley thinks the church’s confrontational spirit – the thing that pushes its members to openly debate whether the US is doing things right – goes all the way back to its beginnings in England. Before it came to an America that would be ripe for division.

ASHLEY: John Wesley, our founder, really encouraged persons to challenge social norms. You know, as a priest in the Church of England, he was both a representative of the church and the state. And so he's in this role and challenging both sources of his authority to be inclusive of more persons. When, when John Wesley is talking about the equality of all or seeking equity for all no matter their race, gender or their sexuality, those challenged the very heart of, of what it meant to be a full citizen in England. And we see a lot of the same happen in the United States.

SCORING <Curious Development Strings Only>

ASHLEY: So, for example, in the early 19th century, Methodists are trying to figure out how and where and when to include Black Methodists in their worship services. And this is the same time that states within the United States are trying to figure out if slavery is going to extend further and further West, or further and further South as the country expands.

TINY SCORING POST

ASHLEY: Later on, by the 1870s, Methodists are figuring out whether or not women can be seated as delegates at General Conference. And this is right around the same time where we see the suffrage circuit, arguing for women's rights to vote and have, essentially, a seat in American politics take place.

TINY SCORING POST

ASHLEY: Jumping forward even further, the 1950s, where women take on new roles, they begin to take over the workplaces in new ways. They have greater access to, to equal education. And all of these new opportunities are opened up to them. And that is also when the Methodist Church grants full ordination rights to women in 1956.

TINY SCORING POST

ASHLEY: And I would say when – in the 1960s and 1970s, when we start to see, within the United States politics, the emergence of the “evangelical voting bloc”, there also emerges within the Methodist Church and the United Methodist Church, this kind of evangelical voting bloc as well, that uses really similar rhetoric to push a more conservative understanding of gender and sexuality within the Methodist and the United Methodist Church that it's doing within kind of United States politics.

TINY SCORING POST

ASHLEY: So this is one of those consistencies that is always there between the Methodist tradition and the United States in terms of its political rhetoric.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: In the 1980s. Did the Methodists get worked up about capitalism?

ASHLEY: Methodists have kind of always been worked up about capitalism.

NOEL: <laughs>

ASHLEY: John Wesley encouraged people to, like, not own anything. To save all you can and give all you can. And he allegedly never kept a dollar to his name, but nobody would have ever thought of him as an impoverished person.

NOEL: Hey, lemme ask you something: John Wesley urged people to not own anything. I would assume that means people? During the time of the slave trade, were the Methodist sort of fighting openly about, you know, about this, this great American evil?

ASHLEY: Yes. So during John Wesley's time, John Wesley is kind of one of the few British clergy persons to openly critique slavery. And one of the ways that he does this is he writes three general rules, is what they're called. Those three general rules are ‘do no harm’, ‘do good’, and ‘attend to the ordinances of God’. And under each of those rather vague rules, he gives specific examples of how you do each of those things. Under do no harm, slavery was listed as an extreme way of people doing harm. And then finally, before he dies, his last written letter is to William Wilberforce, who's a very famous British abolitionist, and he asks William Wilberforce, who was also a Methodist, to carry on the Methodist witness against slavery. So at the height of the Atlantic slave trade, John Wesley was… was all about pushing the boundaries of religion and society to include everybody.

NOEL: Ultimately, disagreements about slavery resulted in a big split in the Methodist Church in 1844, and the Civil War started 17 years later.

Should we look at what's happening TODAY in the Methodist Church as another one of those big schisms?

ASHLEY: Yes and no. You know, right now, the United Methodist Church within the United States, we lost about 25% of our of our congregations. And, you know, coming out of General Conference, I see that the United Methodist Church did something it's never done before. We have never voted to constitutionally amend our structure – it has to be ratified still – but we've never done that without some sort of merger causing that. And so right now, the United Methodist Church is taking a firm stance on its identity and seeking to reclaim and reshape its identity in 2024. And I think, you know, hopefully the United States might be able to do something similar. In order to do that, it’ll require deep vulnerability with one another. It'll require looking past and maybe even listening beyond or around certain loud, powerful voices. The Methodist Church has finally done that. And it's a joyous day in the UMC. It could be a joyous day in the United States, but, you know, I take this as a mirror for maybe the United States to, to look at and say, ‘Well, the United Methodist did it. <laughs> Maybe we could do it, too.’

NOEL: I, I hear you, Ashley, and I love your optimism, I really do. But I am thinking back to the first half of the show, when we heard, you know, a member of the congregation express her very real disappointment…

ASHLEY: Mh-hmm.

NOEL: Her sense that the Methodist Church was no longer for her. And in fact, she feared it was no longer for her, her children or her grandchildren. The Methodist Church in this moment did move forward, but it moved forward by shedding, as you said, about a quarter – a quarter – of what it had. This is the thing we've been batting around all along is that the United States tends to… the battles tend to be mappable onto each other. We can't lose 25% of Americans. We, we, you know – but, but we can alienate 25% of our neighbors. We can make them feel like they don't belong in this country, that this country is for our kind of people now. When you think about that, does that, does that dull your optimism at all? Does that make you fear at all?

ASHLEY: What I would say is there's, there's a little bit of a difference between being in practice and being on paper. I'm going to say it that way. Right now, kind of the big change that we see within the United Methodist Church is that for the first time since our founding in 1784, on paper, we are not excluding anybody. We are finally not limiting the rights of Black persons or persons of color, of women, or of LGBTQ persons at any level of the church. Now that it's no longer on paper, we can do the work of living into it in practice. For the United States, the – what makes me nervous is: our paper seems to get more and more restricting, right. I live in New Jersey. I, as a woman of reproductive age, I have full autonomy over my body in New Jersey. My sister living in Arkansas does not.

SCORING <The Gentle Push>

ASHLEY: I'm not saying that in order to move on, as the United States, we need to lose 25% of our people. I think that in order to move on as the United States, we need to stop limiting persons’ rights and access on paper and allow them to agree or disagree, but stop restricting people's abilities and rights on paper. And that is what the United Methodist Church has finally done. And people are free to agree or disagree with that. But that has to be a lived, embodied practice.

NOEL: Dr. Ashley Boggan of the United Methodist Church.

SCORING CHANGES TO <METHODIST SINGING>

NOEL: Today’s episode was produced by Amanda Lewellyn and reported by Laura Bullard, edited by Matt Collette, fact-checked by Amina Al-Sadi, and engineered Patrick Boyd.

I’m Noel King. This is *The day that the lord hath made, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]