

Utah Methodist pastor takes on a demanding role in a faith on the brink of an LGBTQ schism

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Byline: Libby Seline | The Salt Lake Tribune

Body

The Rev. Elizabeth McVicker's call to be a pastor came like a whisper.

After her family moved to Tulsa, Okla., from Burma in 1971, the Boston Avenue United Methodist Church became McVicker's spiritual home. But she didn't foresee pursuing the ministry until after she moved away.

She majored in American studies at Yale University but graduated in 1990 with a yearning to learn why she believed in her faith. She went on to the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, Calif., until 1992. It was there, surrounded by people from various walks of life, that she learned a Chinese American woman could be a pastor.

And now she will serve as a sort of pastor over pastoring as superintendent of the United Methodist Church's Utah/Western Colorado District — and at a time when the denomination is making headlines for being divided as much as united.

"God knew what I needed, knew the process I needed to take in order to even hear a call to ministry," she said. "I couldn't envision myself as a pastor because all of my role models as pastors had been white, middle-class men. And being female and Chinese American and from a blue-collar family, it never even occurred to me that I could be a pastor."

McVicker will assume the superintendent job July 1 and oversee almost every United Methodist congregation in Utah — except, ironically, Salt Lake City's landmark First United Methodist Church and Centenary United Methodist Church, the two congregations she has pastored since 2016.

The faith's protocol does not permit a pastor to have contact with a former church for one year after leaving. This, the thinking goes, allows the new minister to develop relationships with that church.

So, McVicker will do her best to connect with the 50 churches she will oversee. As superintendent, she will assign pastors to meet the needs of specific congregations, an especially vital step in a faith group that is poised to split over beliefs relating to same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ clergy.

The United Methodist Church planned to vote on legislation to separate the few "traditionalist" churches, which don't support same-sex marriage and LGBTQ clergy, from the rest during a global conference in May. But, due to the coronavirus pandemic, that historic meeting will now begin in late August 2021.

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McVicker and Bishop Karen Oliveto, who leads all seven districts in the faith's Mountain Sky Conference, support same-sex marriage. In fact, Oliveto is a trailblazer on the issue. She married a woman and became the first openly lesbian United Methodist bishop.

Even so, both Oliveto and McVicker believe that the church has a home for diversity in theological perspectives, and they are unsure if the traditionalist congregations in McVicker's district actually will break away.

If these traditionalist congregations need a new pastor before next year's vote, McVicker can appoint a minister who will not force them to change their view. If a schism occurs, however, those congregations could decide to go a separate way.

McVicker said she has reached out to her more conservative colleagues to remind them they have a place within the denomination, and the conference delay gives her a chance to continue her relationships with them.

She said that most of the United Methodist churches in her district accept LGBTQ clergy and embrace same-sex marriage. But she wants all the congregations to feel accepted.

"We don't all have to agree on everything in order to be connected as the body of Christ, and there's room for disagreement about theology," she said. "If the traditional churches want to stay in connection with the more inclusive theology, then, as a district superintendent, I would honor that."

As superintendent, McVicker plans to prioritize inclusivity. In addition to accepting churches of various viewpoints, she aspires to introduce services in Spanish and connect with younger populations.

"My image of what the kingdom of God is, is that we are all part of God's beloved kingdom, that God loves each and every one of us in our uniqueness," McVicker said. "My role as a pastor is to help people see that they're part of the kingdom already and to make the kingdom visible."

Oliveto urged McVicker to serve as superintendent, and the Utah pastor accepted, unsure of the new opportunity.

"When I was asked to be a district superintendent, I never really saw myself as that being my forte," McVicker said. "... But she said that she wanted me in that role. And so that's the commitment I've made — to respond affirmatively when those calls are made."

The Rev. Marv Vose, the current superintendent, has been training his successor since January via Zoom. As for her replacement, McVicker said she is excited for A.J. Bush to take over at both of her former Salt Lake City churches.

Becky Buxton, a lay leader at First United Methodist Church, predicts McVicker will succeed in her new role.

"Elizabeth has really strong administrative skills, and she's also a powerful speaker," Buxton said. "... We're all really excited that she's moving to somewhere where she can bring churches together."

Oliveto said she expects McVicker to guide churches to excellence in their ministry — regardless of their views on the LGBTQ community.

"The best of our tradition in the United Methodist Church," Oliveto said, is personal piety, coupled with social holiness, and I think she lives that out very boldly, and I'd like her to lead others to do that."

After her training, McVicker now feels more confident in her new task. And though she once was unsure about fulfilling her call as a pastor, she knows that she "can't go wrong serving God."

"I can't imagine doing anything else with my life," she said. "I love being involved in people's lives and showing them an understanding of God that I have who is a caring and compassionate, grace-filled power that cares about each one of us. And that when we join our hearts to God's heart, miraculous things can happen."

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