

# Finishing the Journey

Questions and answers  
from United Methodists of conviction

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(ISBN: 0-9679481-0-X)

To the memory  
of Gene Leggett and Jim Wardlow,  
faithful United Methodists

*“Just as I am, thy love unknown  
hath broken every barrier down;  
now, to be thine, yea, thine alone;  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.”*

*“Love, like death, hath all destroyed,  
rendered all distinctions void;  
names and sects and parties fall;  
thou, O Christ, art all in all!”*

– Charles Wesley

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## Acknowledgements

This publication has been generously underwritten by the Leggett-Wardlow Lecture Fund, which was established to encourage dialogue on fairness and justice in the United Methodist Church. Its name honors the memory of Gene Leggett and Jim Wardlow, two devoted United Methodists.

The editors, John Thornburg and Alicia Dean, also would like to thank the following:

- Nancy Kruh, copy editor, book designer, and production editor, who provided insight and direction.
- All those who wrote chapters for the book, for their belief in the project.
- The congregation and staff of Northaven United Methodist church, who encourage us to be who we are.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Why do we need to take this journey?

*Kathleen Baskin is senior pastor of Greenland Hills United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas. Her bilingual skills and her commitment to ministry at the margins have led her to pastor a multi-ethnic congregation in the inner-city, to cross international borders in mission, and to engage in a wide spectrum of community activities.*

From time to time in my ministry, I have been compelled by circumstances – either in the faith community or in the larger community – to step into the issue of homosexuality and the church. Whenever I beckon my congregations to journey with me, I know I can expect to hear familiar refrains from one member or another:

“Haven’t we done enough on that?”

“I’m so tired of this.”

“Why do we have to keep talking about it?”

“Why stir things up?”

Of course, it’s natural for us to want what makes us uncomfortable to just disappear. Yet common sense also tells us that we don’t get rid of our discomfort simply by wishing it away or pretending it doesn’t exist.

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Why so many heterosexual people feel uncomfortable about the issue of homosexuality is understandable. In our childhoods, we were handed what we thought were all the answers – homosexuality is wrong; the Bible says so. It couldn't have been any easier. Given that, why wouldn't we resist a deeper examination? Why should we have to sift through all the evidence ourselves, ask our own questions, work toward our own discernments?

Contemplating such a journey churns up our fears of stepping into the unknown. Some of us know that beliefs we've long held close will be challenged. These things make us lose sight of why we must embark. We are so engulfed in our own fears that we don't even notice the pain and suffering of others in our midst.

I, myself, did not begin speaking out on issues concerning homosexuality until I knew this pain. It was first brought to me 20 years ago by a dear friend, a church organist who one day revealed to me that he was gay. As he shared his story, I listened with my heart as well as my head for the first time. I began my own journey that day, discovering so much about myself, about him and about what it means to be homosexual.

Over the years in my ministry, gay and lesbian parishioners have come to me, to sit in the privacy of my office and describe their own pain – of overhearing other members' careless whispers, of being marginalized by the United Methodist Church. They have come to United Methodism because they hunger for God's justice, mercy, love, and grace, yet once here, they are made to feel that some are more deserving of it than others.

I listen to their stories, and as I hear their pain, I long for the church to share fully the burden of that pain. As I Corinthians 12:26 tells us, "If one member suffers, all suffer together."

Years ago, Paul's lesson was magnified and amplified for me while on a visit to South Africa during the wicked reign of apartheid. There, on a human-rights poster, I saw a slogan that has since become central in my ministry:



“If you’ve come here to help me, you’re wasting your time. But if you’ve come here because your liberation is bound up with mine, let us work together.”

With these words, I could vividly see my own connectedness to the disenfranchised, the oppressed, and the outcast. We are all in need of liberation – freedom from the powerful forces that seek to separate us from God and one another. These words also have helped me come to understand that I am called, not to rescue the gay and lesbian parishioners who sit in pain before me, but to join with them as we seek our liberation.

We have to struggle through it together. This is more than common sense; this is the route to our liberation that God has plotted for us. We have been called to take this arduous journey. We have been called to take it with one another.

Doing so will take great courage and belief in God’s purpose. During the course of the journey, we may feel a shift in our foundations of what we believe to be right and wrong. But be assured: God will remain steadfast and at work among us, boldly leading us to ultimate victory over sin and evil.

Of other things, we also can be sure: that Jesus’ greatest commandment, to love God and love your neighbor as yourself, will remain the foundation upon which we base our faithful discipleship. Above all, no matter what, we still have the blessed assurance that Jesus Christ is our savior and his gracious love is our gift. It is this love that will see us through what may be a difficult journey.

With this book, we also know we are hand in hand with trustworthy guides. The men and women who have contributed here are familiar to us; all stand strong in the tradition of United Methodism. They are the people who sit next to us in church. They are our pastors. And they are the scholars who have taught our pastors.

The time is now. As I have beckoned my own congregations, I beckon again. The journey awaits. Come. Let us go together.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Why should we care about this issue?

*Paul Escamilla is the senior pastor of Walnut Hill United Methodist Church in Dallas. His writings on worship, the sacraments, and the spiritual life have appeared in Weavings, Quarterly Review, and Circuit Rider.*

I ndeed, why should we care? After all, when we have cared in the past for a person or group beyond the margins of the mainstream it has only gotten us into trouble. If we know our Bible, we know how true that is.

Take, for instance, the genealogy of Jesus, according to the Gospel of Matthew. It includes the likes of Rahab and Ruth, women of either ill repute, conniving instincts, foreign blood, or some combination of the three. They made their way into the fold of the faithful by hook or by crook, their deviousness matched by the vulnerability of caring people who agreed to take them in. Once inside the fold, what did they give us? Okay, a savior, but what else? The fact is, they smeared and sullied a perfectly good genealogy, all because people were willing to care for others beyond the margins.

If we trust the Bible, we should heed its lessons about the

high price of caring for those people whom society and the respected religious establishment have deliberately, purposefully, and reasonably excluded. It just doesn't pay. For example, Jesus was caring toward Samaritans, sinners, tax collectors, and lepers – a whole host of taboo groups – and look where it got him: crucified. Peter responded to an astonishing vision of unclean animals coming out of the heavens, and next thing you know, he was standing in the unholy living room of an unpedigreed Gentile, pronouncing the church open to the unkosher. The turmoil that resulted from this “caring” gesture is unfathomable. What might have been a storybook unfolding of the early church's history instead became bogged down in controversy, reactionism, and infighting.

If the Bible means anything to us – and if we claim to live by its authority – we should pay close attention to the example it sets before us: When people chose to follow God's direction and welcomed outsiders, they lost. In some cases, they lost their lives; in others, they lost respectability and credibility with the mainstream. At the very least, they lost some of their traditional moorings, as well as sleep at night.

Of course, to be fair we should acknowledge other facts, as well. These same people who chose to care turned out again and again to be vessels of grace, instruments of the Spirit, prophets of truth, and in one case, the Messiah. And the cared-for ones – the Rahabs and Ruths, the Samaritans and Gentiles – often ended up becoming salt and light, heralds of truth and good news, even close kin to that very same Messiah.

Why should we care about a matter that stirs so many to turn their heads the other way? There is no good reason I can think of, unless it would be that our lives depend on it.

After all, the Bible is what shows us that, even though caring can get us in big trouble, it finally is what saves us, too.

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*Jane Marshall is a teacher, conductor, and composer of sacred choral music; her work appears in numerous hymnals, including the United Methodist Church's. Her career has included 30 years of teaching in the music division at the Meadows School of the Arts and in the sacred music program at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas.*

I cannot answer for you, but as for me:

I care because I know so many gay men and lesbians who suffer because they are not fully accepted by the church they love.

I care because, in taking the time to study this issue with doctors and psychologists, I came to realize that sexual orientation is innate. We can no more change what we are, gay or straight, than we can change the color of our skin or the length of our arms and legs. And so, if homosexuality is God-given, how can I not pronounce it good?

I care because I resent the cruel and baseless stereotyping that all homosexuals are molesters or predators – as preposterous a notion as suggesting that all heterosexuals are faithful to their vows of marriage.

I care because my church professes to be composed of followers of a Christ who loved all people unconditionally and impartially. Yet this is the same church that tells homosexuals they can attend services and support their congregations with their tithes, but cannot teach Sunday school, chair committees, direct music, or work with youth.

I care because I'm sickened by the division this issue has caused in the church I have loved for so long. How can any of us who call ourselves *United Methodists* share communion, and at the same time, hold fast to an official policy that reflects exclusivity and injustice?

I care because I want desperately for my "I" to become "we": to know that the United Methodist Church, at every level, embraces all of God's people unconditionally.



*Shirley W. Cooper is a Dallas, Texas, homemaker and a 58-year United Methodist. She and her husband, Jim, who died in 1998, were charter members of the Dallas chapter of Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG); she has frequently spoken before groups about her faith and the issue of homosexuality.*

As followers of Jesus Christ, how can we not care about any issue that causes so much pain for so many people? In Matthew 22:39, Jesus identifies the second greatest commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If we truly love our neighbors, we will know them well enough to be concerned about issues that they find particularly disturbing and painful. The relationship between the United Methodist Church and its gay and lesbian members is just such an issue.

What happens when we become friends with the gay people in our churches? Only then can we truly understand how the pejorative language in the Book of Discipline is the result of misunderstanding, misinformation, and false stereotypes. The better we know our lesbian and gay friends, the more hurtful the words in the Discipline become.

I am the mother of a wonderful son who happens to be gay. Against any measure, he has proven himself an asset to his community. In school, he was a National Merit Scholar; today, he holds a responsible position with the Environmental Protection Agency. He is a kind and generous person with strong integrity; he also is a devout Christian, a choir member at his United Methodist church. Yet the church's position regards him as a second-class member, ineligible to participate in all aspects of church life.

I am especially offended that the Discipline disparages the relationships of gay and lesbian couples. My son and his partner have had a loving, committed relationship for 11 years, and I know many other gay and lesbian couples who have shared

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a life for 30 years or more. I believe these relationships deserve the same respect, recognition, and honor as my 44-year marriage. Yet the church considers them unworthy of blessing.

We understand the absurdity of the church's stance on gay issues when we take the time to know the people it affects. We also then know how much the church is missing by not fully including its gay members with their considerable talents and dedication.

By taking the time to know the families and friends of gay men and lesbians, we understand how they, too, are suffering because of the church's position. I feel fortunate that I'm a part of a United Methodist congregation that fully embraces its gay and lesbian members in its life. But as a member of Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, I have seen parents come to our meetings in great distress – not because their children are gay, but because of their churches' condemnation of their children. Ultimately, many leave their churches because they have been so alienated.

Why should we care about this issue? Because we, as the church, must bear part of the responsibility for the hurt that has been so unjustly inflicted. We must not let our proclamation of God's unconditional love be drowned out by the words of exclusion and discrimination.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Is homosexuality a sin?

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When, sometime ago, I mentioned to a colleague that I was writing about the relation of homosexuality and sin, his response was not exactly encouraging.

“Good luck,” he said, “that’s a loselose issue.”

Perhaps comments such as his are the reason there are virtually no reflections on this matter. But it seems to me that we lose even more if we continue to dodge the question of sin. Liberals are sucked more and more into some amorphous concern for inclusivity where “anything goes,” and conservatives are stuck with definitions of sin that not so long ago also included dancing and going to movies.

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Let me propose three understandings of sin that might help us to think once again about sin and human sexuality, and to reframe the question of whether committed homosexual relationships are inherently sinful.

In its most fundamental sense, sin signifies the separation of humanity and God and – as a consequence – the separation of human beings from one another. To sin is to turn in upon oneself. This sort of sin is best overcome by learning how to live in mutually committed relationships with other human beings and with God – relationships that include body and spirit. Such relationships have traditionally been exemplified by monogamous partnerships. Whether heterosexual or homosexual, everyone has the same potential for sinfulness; both types can fail and both types can, as we now know, resist self-centeredness and be a model for mutually committed and unselfish relations.

In another sense, sin is a cover-up of how we fail to live up to God's intention for us: creations for relationship with God and with other human beings. We are called to connect with one another in love, trust, and respect. Yet often we misuse others for our own selfish purposes; we try to shape each other in our own image. In marriage, in particular, haven't many of our relationships become exactly the kind of cover-ups that hide, and therefore perpetuate, the quest for superiority and self-aggrandizement of one of the partners? Again, heterosexuals and homosexuals alike possess equal potential for this sort of self-centered, abusive behavior. In the same vein, both are equally capable of expressing God's intention. We can overcome this sin not by finger-pointing but by developing self-critical awareness, which will lead to repentance.

Finally, sin must also be understood as failure to keep the rules of the covenant – in other words, to obey the commandments. But here we still need to engage in serious theological discussion about which Levitical codes of conduct are relevant for us today. Readers of the Bible know that it makes little sense



claiming all the rules put down there. Unfortunately, well-meaning Christians and the church have – often unconsciously – selected those rules that support their own way of life and have neglected others. We have elevated the 10 Commandments, for instance, but dropped the regulation that requires the restitution of property every 50th year; this is a regulation that might be quite relevant today, considering the debt of many Third World countries.

In order to choose more wisely in the future, we need to clarify how we select the rules we will follow. Where are the blind spots? Is our selection once again eliminating the concerns of those who are different, those who have less power, those who are not in a position to defend themselves? As United Methodist Christians, we must clarify for ourselves once again how we hold ourselves accountable to God's will.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### What does the Bible say about homosexuality?

*John C. Holbert is a United Methodist minister with a doctorate in Old Testament studies; for 21 years, he has served on the faculty of Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. Currently the Lois Craddock Perkins professor of homiletics, he has written several books, including his most recent, Preaching Job, published in 1999.*

**I**n fact, the Bible says nothing at all about homosexuality, at least in the way we in the 21st century think of it. The concept – in terms of sexual orientation – was unknown until the advent of modern sociological and psychological analyses in the 19th century. While various ancient texts and several biblical texts have served as resources for modern discussions about sexual orientation, what these texts meant by same-sex relations and what we mean by them are very different.

The writers of long ago regularly assumed that all same-sex relationships involved one person's exploitation of another. They could not conceive that such relationships might be nurturing, stable, and covenantal, but could only be lustful, exploitative, and cruel.

It is against that background that the Bible's writings about same-sex relationships should be seen. Following are the texts traditionally examined in connection with the question of homosexuality:

- Genesis 1-2: It's a familiar catchphrase among certain readers of the Bible that Genesis speaks of "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve," but nowhere in these famous chapters are we told that heterosexuality is the exclusive form of sexuality. Those who wrote the chapters were announcing quite rightly that the perpetuation of the race assumes the pairing of a man and a woman. But careful analysis of the evidence shows that Genesis 1-2 was not intended as a paradigm of marriage. These chapters describe in poetry and story the beginnings of human society – the establishment by God of a world in which God's creatures might find shalom, wholeness, and unity. As the subsequent history of humanity has abundantly demonstrated, a great diversity was built on this foundation story.

- Genesis 19: Two things should be noted about the infamous story *of* Sodom and Gomorrah. First, the notion that the story concerns homosexual rape is called into question by a careful reading of verse 4: "Before they [the angels and Lot] lay down, the people of the city, the people of Sodom, both young and old, all the people surrounded the house." In its original Hebrew, two different nouns are used to refer to the people of the city, and neither is gender-specific. Hence the scene is perhaps not one of homosexual rape, but rather of depraved violence by the entire town – men, women, and children – against strangers who have come for refuge. Second, nowhere in the Bible is Sodom's sin identified as homosexuality (see Ezekiel 16:48-49 for a typical example). The evil of Sodom, then, ought not to be seen as homosexuality or homosexual rape.

- Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13: These formulations against same-gender sex should be seen only in their ancient nation-

building context. Emerging nations are always concerned with establishing their identities in contrast with their neighbors, and they are concerned with growing and prospering. Sacred prostitution, both male and female, was practiced by Israel's neighbors as a way to ensure the fertility of the fields, and Israel wanted no part of it. And, of course, same-sex relationships could not bring about numerical growth in the struggling nation. Hence, the words "abomination" and "ritually impure" are employed to describe such relationships. But these same disapproving words also appear in other parts of the Holiness Code, such as the prohibition of eating certain kinds of birds (Leviticus 11). In short, the basis for the code disappeared centuries ago, and to quote a verse or two as a way of bolstering modern behavior is to engage in the most egregious sort of proof-texting.

- Romans 1:26-27: These famous lines list examples of Paul's understanding of the consequences of the fallen state of humanity. He wrote here, as some of his contemporaries wrote, of out-of-control passions that had become ends in themselves. The men and women whom Paul described in these lines were, in fact, heterosexuals performing homosexual acts. As was the case with his contemporaries, Paul knew nothing of homosexual orientation; he assumed all people were by nature heterosexual, and if they were engaging in homosexual acts, they could be nothing but terrible examples of human sinfulness. Paul's imperfect knowledge of this issue was fully reflective of the imperfect knowledge of his culture. We ought not ascribe to Paul the last word on the question of same-sex relationships any more than we should assume that his comments concerning the length of men's and women's hair (I Corinthians 11:2-16) are definitive for all time.

- I Corinthians 6:9-10: Here again in this list of vices – examples of wickedness symptomatic of sin – Paul wrote of same-sex relationships as necessarily willful, lustful, exploitative, self-deceiving, and finally idolatrous. Again, nothing in his world informed him of relationships conceived in any other fashion.

In summary, the writers of the Bible could not conceive of innate homosexual orientation; in fact, it was always their assumption that all human behavior was freely chosen. Hence, if same-sex relations seemed to fly in the face of some ascribed norm, it was believed this behavior could be changed by a force of rational will. However, if homosexual orientation is as much given as chosen, as many researchers have now concluded, it would be just as wrong to demand homosexuals change their orientation as it would be wrong to demand left-handed people use their right hands.

The writers of the Bible could know nothing of a homosexuality that is loving, faithful, and monogamous. Indeed, the Bible's concern to promote love and justice among all of God's people would certainly question any homosexual relationship that did not manifest those characteristics, just as surely as it would question a similarly flawed heterosexual relationship.

In the final analysis, the Bible says very little about same-sex relationships. But it has much to say about God's love and justice for all, and God's desire for God's creatures to practice the same.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### What does the Bible call us, as Christians, to do on this issue?

*Bishop Richard B. Wilke is now retired after serving 12 years in Arkansas; he is bishop-in-residence at Southwestern College, a United Methodist institution in Winfield, Kansas.*

I am amazed at my lifelong ignorance of homosexuality. I have spent my ministry dealing mostly with the uses, misuses, and abuses of sex among heterosexuals. But I did not understand (or worry about) my energetic, popular youth fellowship leaders who did not date. I was grateful for the Wesleyan Service Guild women, some of whom lived together and cared for each other for 50 or 60 years. My grandmother housed schoolteachers who ate at the same table, slept in the same room and prayed together in church. I, like most of society, was caught off guard when some of my young friends, committed to the Lord, active in the church, began to die of AIDS.

So I began to explore Scripture and to talk with homosexuals and their families. I discovered that Sodom was destroyed for its violent inhospitality to strangers. The angry, lustful townspeople were eager to rape, violate, maim, and kill the strangers – be they men or women – who were visiting Lot. The prophet Ezekiel wrote (16:49), “This was the guilt of your sister

Sodom: She and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” Jesus implied that Sodom was guilty of ugly inhospitality in Luke 10:10-12.

The Holiness Code in Leviticus and Deuteronomy was designed to set the Jews apart from the Canaanites. It was not a universal morality. It was peculiar to the Hebrews – and to the times. It reflected one side of the constant tension in Judaism, as well as in all religions, between exclusion and inclusion. For example, no one maimed or castrated could enter the temple (Deuteronomy 23:1), yet Isaiah argued the opposite – that a castrated man who kept Sabbath was welcome (Isaiah 56:4-5). I’ve been fascinated with the fact that the first person converted by Philip the Evangelist was a black man, an African eunuch, forbidden by the Holiness Code to go near the temple (Acts 8:26-40). Also, the Holiness Code prohibited marriage to a Gentile (Ezra, for example, made the Jewish men divorce their non-Jewish wives), yet Ruth the Moabite was honored as King David’s great-grandmother.

Neither Jews nor Christians obey the Holiness Code today. Christians eat shrimp because Jesus said, “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles” (Matthew 15:11). We do not stone those taken in adultery because Jesus said, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7). No one today would justify killing children who spoke back to their mother or father (Deuteronomy 21:18).

The prophet Isaiah rebelled at the exclusiveness of the Holiness Code, arguing that people should come from all nations – from the north, south, east, and west. “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6).

Paul does graphically list sins where women have sex with women, and men with men, but Paul was familiar with only two kinds of homosexual activity: when wealthy Greeks would buy young boys as slaves and play with them sexually, and when part

of the Greek-Roman world would go to male and female prostitute/priests as a form of fertility or mystery cult worship. In Romans Chapter 1, Paul was trying to make a point by listing every sin he could think of. He wanted to show that we have all fallen short, that we are all sinners in need of the atoning grace of God. As I reflect on the list of sins, I know not a day goes by but what I am guilty and in need of grace.

But Jesus and his ministry concern me most. He was nearly killed in his hometown for mentioning that Elisha healed the Assyrian general, Naaman, of leprosy. He was continually condemned for touching the leper, for opening the eyes of blind beggars (who were considered ceremonially unclean), and for talking with a Samaritan woman.

My most soul-shaking scripture is Luke 15:1-2. Jesus drew tax collectors and sinners to himself. Religious leaders grumbled and said, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” When queried, he told stories about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost boy. His point was this: They were to be brought back into circulation, into community. The context is the inclusive ministry of Jesus for which he was crucified.

As I’ve said, I’ve spent a lot of time dealing with people with various sexual issues. I believe sex, like fire, can do a lot of harm and a lot of good. There are many sexual sins – heterosexual and homosexual – that are foreign to faith. Surely our consciences condemn prostitution, pedophilia, rape, promiscuity, and exploitation. But I also believe from scientific data and from conversations with gay men and lesbians and their families, that Christ Jesus can capture the hearts of homosexuals, and can lead them into faithful, stable, and loving relationships.

When I see two men or two women kneeling together to take the holy communion, working diligently for human betterment, and caring for each other across the years, I must pause and believe there is room for them in the household of God. As Fanny Crosby says in her hymn, “There is room at the foot of the cross.”



## CHAPTER SIX

# Why does our church doctrine say “the practice of homosexuality” is “incompatible with Christian teaching”?

*John Thornburg is a fourth-generation United Methodist minister who serves as senior pastor of Northaven United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas. He is a poet and hymn writer whose work appears in several denominational hymnals and collections. His mentors in the faith include two men who were part of the Northaven congregation, Albert Outler and Schubert Ogden.*

Anyone who has ever attended a General Conference knows church doctrine isn't formed as a result of a Pentecost-like unanimity. It is always the result of compromise among passionate people.

At the 1976 General Conference, and at every one since, there have been two sets of conflicting passions over the issue of homosexuality and the church. The first is how the Bible is to be understood. The second is how to be a faithful church.

Our Social Principles declare that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, because the majority of voting delegates over the years have continued to believe that:

- The teaching of Scripture is clear and unequivocal, and/or
- The church would be torn apart if it were seen to condone anything other than celibacy for gay men and lesbians.

I say “and/or” because many United Methodists, including several in key leadership positions, no longer believe the teaching of Scripture is unequivocal, but they are reluctant to be the first to stand up and admit they’ve changed their minds.

The minority voices have argued that the Bible has both timeless truths and time-bound teachings. They offer reminders that the church has previously repented of its adherence to time-bound teachings (such as its defense of slavery), and they believe it ought to do so again on this issue. Those minority voices have also argued that when church unity is achieved by silencing or marginalizing a group of God’s children, it is no unity at all.

So what will happen now? Will we decide that God can work within the tension between the various voices? I pray that we will, because otherwise we dismiss all we’ve come to understand since 1976.

Twenty-four years can make a great difference. In this country, it took less time to desegregate lunch counters, public transportation, schools, and the military. In recent years, even less time has been needed for enormous shifts of sensitivity about sexual harassment, equal opportunity, and gender roles.

Since 1976, the realities related to homosexuality and the church also have experienced a significant shift. Twenty-four years ago, the only gay men and lesbians visible to church leaders were the activist pioneers whose zealous style was perceived as inflammatory and anti-establishment. Today, because so many dedicated gay Christians have had the courage to come out, church leaders know legions of gay men and lesbians whose mainstream lives stand as quiet testimony to their cause.

In 1976, North American culture was still under the sway of Sigmund Freud’s understanding of homosexuality as a form of immaturity. In fact, Albert Outler’s embrace of Freud was a central argument in his floor debate during the General Confer-

ences of the 1970s. In 2000, Freud's interpretation of homosexuality is all but banished from psychiatry.

The membership decline after the 1968 merger made church leaders in the mid-'70s fearful that even more catastrophic losses might result from any stance that appeared to condone "the practice of homosexuality." But despite the emergence of a network of more than 160 churches and campus ministries that have openly welcomed and affirmed gays and lesbians (the Reconciling Congregation Program), membership losses in the denomination have been waning.

God is at work in this tension. Silencing or diminishing the minority voices endangers God's work.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

### What effect does the doctrine have on the gay men and lesbians who belong to Methodist churches?

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*“All persons need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship which enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self.”* – The Book of Discipline, Social Principles 71F.

That grand declaration in the Social Principles might well be the mission statement of the United Methodist Church. Standing alone it could provide the energy and motivation for effective and growing ministry, a glorious restatement of the great commission.

There is a problem, however. This statement is nullified by the very next sentence that describes an entire class of persons as “incompatible with Christian teaching.” Including this judgmental and exclusionary statement in the Discipline has diverted the church from its task of making and nurturing disciples. For

those of us who are marginalized by it, this divisive and distracting doctrine also has caused immense pain.

I was attracted to the church by its message of God's unlimited grace and forgiveness, as well as by the opportunity the church offered to work toward a more compassionate and just society. My experience tells me that, while many United Methodist congregations offer these blessings to others, the invitation does not include me, only because I happen to be a gay man.

As a young man struggling with issues of sexual identity, I needed the church to "enable reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self" more than even I could have imagined. What I received from the church was condemnation and threats of God's vengeance if I did not change who I was. The church left me alone and lonely in the struggle.

In early adulthood I resigned myself to the judgment of the church that I was deviant and unacceptable. I turned myself to the task of re-orientation through prayer, study of Hebrew and Christian Scripture, trying to meet the church's expectation. These efforts proved futile in changing my sexual orientation. They also did little for my self-esteem. The next step for me was silence and deception. To be quiet and invisible, at the margins of the community of faith, seemed better than the abuse that open honesty would invite.

Later, I joined a Methodist congregation that at least seemed to ignore my sexual orientation. But after more than 15 years of attendance and support, I would experience the ultimate alienation when the church decided by action of the administrative board and congregational vote that gay men and lesbians could not participate in the charge conference or be named to church offices.

Out of this painful experience I gained two important insights. It became clear to me that I must claim for myself God's gracious love and forgiveness in Christ without the nurturing help of the church. It also became clear to me that my brothers and sisters in the United Methodist Church sincerely believed that by pronouncing me "incompatible" they were af-

firming what they saw as their traditional, Biblical, moral, and spiritual values.

It seemed to me that Acts 10 was being reenacted before my very eyes. Once again, God was hearing the prayers of faithful Gentile centurion Cornelius; once again, God also was admonishing the Apostle Peter to give up his Jewish laws of exclusion. "What God has made clean, you have no right to call profane," God told the Apostle in a trance. Peter protested; he could not reconcile the notion that God would accept what the law had clearly rejected. But God is in the saving business, and once Peter had heard that the Gentile centurion had received a divine message of acceptance, the Apostle put it all together. "Who was I that I could hinder God?" Peter exclaimed.

I'm not suggesting that the Social Principle is the only cause of our pain as gay and lesbian Methodists, but I do know that the offensive language intensifies it. Ostracism, marginalization, and violence against gay men and lesbians are deeply embedded in societal attitude and popular culture. In the name of purity of doctrine, the United Methodist Church has granted theological permission to the inequities, intolerance, and fear. Instead of confronting the oppressive culture and attempting to change it, our church has legitimized it. That makes my pain as a gay Methodist more intense.

This is a serious charge. It most certainly does not apply to all United Methodists. Today, I am blessed to be a part of a courageous community of faith where clergy and laity are determined to welcome all believers. Its spirituality is rooted in and grows out of a thoughtful melding of Biblical assessment and social concern. All sinners are invited to bow in awe before the holiness of God and hold out our open hands to receive the abundant grace of God. The community recognizes my baptism and that of my partner. We are supported with friendship as we offer our prayers, presence, gifts, and service. I pray that soon all United Methodist congregations will be as welcoming.

As the General Conference wrestles with its conflicted understanding of doctrinal purity, centralized authority, and the

need for social justice, some anxiety is to be expected. The process of gaining clarity and consensus on these large issues is not well served by language that simply demands conformity without addressing real-life diversity. Spiritual unity in Christ is not to be confused with doctrinal uniformity in belief and behavior. Stop the pain. Do it now, in the spirit of the gospel, with joy and generosity!



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Every Sunday, I went to my United Methodist church – through baptism and confirmation, youth group, youth choir, adult choir, church committees. After 30 years of nurturing and love, I was filled with the encouragement to grow into the person God had created me to be.

Church doctrine itself told me that sexuality is recognized as God's good gift to all people, and that people may be fully human only when that gift is acknowledged and affirmed by themselves, the church, and society.

But then, in the next breath, doctrine also told me that my gift was not compatible with Christian teaching.

How could that be? How could I honor God if I could not be all that God created me to be?

In my home church, the whispers and gossip rose into a cacophony of fear: "They" are going to take over our church! If we allow "them" to be seen in our church, people will get the wrong idea!

With a smugness born of “following the doctrine and polity of the United Methodist Church,” parishioners told me that I could participate peripherally and give my money but that I must keep my mouth shut. Heartbroken, I moved on – to find another United Methodist church home, another church family – more careful this time to protect myself, but still working to be who God had created me to be. I learned that, as long as I didn’t make people uncomfortable, as long as I was discreet about my relationship with my partner, I was accepted as an integral and important part of this new church. I taught Sunday school to children; I was the children’s choir director; I chaired the evangelism committee and the staff-parish relations committee.

Then I felt called to full-time ministry – and the whispers began anew: *She wants us to recognize her “gifts and graces”! No way! She’s not fit!*

At a church conference, a friend – a fellow choir member I had sat next to for 10 years – shouted: “Are you in a committed, loving relationship with a woman?” I wept. How could they not have known? Why were my “gifts and graces” accepted until I made the announcement of God’s call on my life?

After 10 years, once again I was told that all are children of God, baptized into the body of Christ, but some are more worthy than others. And so grief-stricken, I moved on to another United Methodist church home, vaguely perceiving that the last 10 years had not been a total waste. God had worked miracles! I left, knowing I had grown in my walk with God and God’s people. I also knew I had left behind seeds of new understanding of what it meant to love one another.

Now, I am in a new United Methodist church family, one that is welcoming of me and the gifts I bring to share. This church, a body of caring individuals, offers me a spiritual respite as I complete my studies at a United Methodist seminary— before I am to go out and share God’s message, risking myself among the misinformed and the uninformed.



And I wonder, will I have to move once again? This time, will I have to change denominations because the United Methodist Church does not want me to be all that God created me to be?

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

# When should our Christian conscience overrule the order of the church?

*Joseph L. Allen is professor emeritus of ethics at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, and he is a retired member of the North Texas Conference. His work in ethics has centered on what it means to be in covenant with God and with one another.*

**I**n 1996, the United Methodist General Conference voted to add to the Book of Discipline: “Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers...” The church’s Judicial Council since has ruled that this statement is binding law and can be the basis for charges against a minister. And yet, some United Methodist ministers conscientiously believe that they should celebrate such unions.

When they do, the act is analogous to protesters’ civil disobedience against a government law they deem unjust. In 1968, the General Conference adopted a careful statement on civil disobedience, later published in the *Daily Christian Advocate*, and it will help us think about similar disobedience to a church law.

The statement made these points:

- Law is valuable and necessary, as is respect for law. Where particular laws are unwise or unjust, people must seek changes through legal procedures.
- When people disagree over a given law, the right of dissent is essential.
- In extreme cases, civil disobedience – nonviolent disobedience of a law – can be justifiable for Christians, for whom the only God is the God of Jesus Christ. Even then they must be willing to accept penalties for their disobedience.

What the 1968 General Conference said about civil disobedience to the state is also true within the church.

Church laws, too, are not necessarily the laws of God. To change a church law we believe to be unjust, we have accepted procedures. In addition, we have the right to dissent openly with one another and, as an extreme measure, to violate the law. Of course, we must be willing to accept the penalties for the violation; this shows respect for the church. The history of the church is testimony to the importance of this extreme practice.

But the question is not simply whether disobedience of church law can be justifiable, but when. Here are key issues that will help guide wise judgment:

- Have established church procedures been exhausted? A faithful member does not rush to disobey. Disobedience may show great conviction; hasty disobedience may also show lack of resourcefulness or a compulsion to rebel.
- Can one find other ways, besides disobedience, to affirm people and convictions? Creative ministers may find effective ways to proclaim a conscientious Christian faith within a law they want changed.

- What is likely to happen because of one's disobedience? Ministers must weigh witnessing to their convictions against alienating others and perhaps even having their ministry suspended.

- Is conscientious disobedience at this time more likely to set the stage for deliberation and to win supporters, or to polarize the community and drive away the undecided?

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## CHAPTER NINE

# Why should the church allow ordination of gay men and lesbians?

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**I**n more than 40 years of ministry as a pastor, seminary administrator and professor in our church, I have been privileged to know talented and dedicated gay and lesbian theological students eager to serve in our denomination, many of them lifelong United Methodists baptized and raised in our church. Yet, unless silent and secretive about loving relationships, they have been denied ordination, excluded by the church in the name of God as being defective and unworthy.

If truth be known, lesbians and gay men have been practicing ordained ministry in the United Methodist Church since the beginnings of ordination. The stumbling block is not in their ability to practice ministry faithfully and effectively but in the blindness of the heterosexual community to recognize and credit

God-given gifts, call, and commitment. “Don’t ask, don’t tell” has been the functioning principle of a fearful church, even though our Social Principles call for inclusiveness (Section IX, paragraph 117):

“Inclusiveness means openness, acceptance, and support that enables all persons to participate in the life of the Church, the community, and the world. Thus, inclusiveness denies every semblance of discrimination.”

It’s time to walk this talk.

There is not a shred of evidence that lesbians and gay men – whether “out” or not – are any less able or willing to love God and neighbor than heterosexuals; no evidence of their being less adept at feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, or visiting the sick; no evidence of less commitment to the weighty matters of justice, mercy, and faith. In relation to ordination, there is no evidence that lesbians and gay men are less capable in service, word, sacrament, and order, nor in conviction and confidence in God’s call to ordained ministry.

The church should be concerned with being biblical in the deepest sense. The ranking of a few questionable statements by Paul above all the pervasive, magnetic fields of texts related to God’s radical love in Jesus can hardly qualify as serious biblical inquiry and authority. To be profoundly biblical from a Christian standpoint is to give prominence to what Jesus lifted up as discipleship and authentic life in response to God’s love: Love God and love your neighbor. Automatically barring gay men and lesbians from ordination because they love “the *wrong* neighbor” is incompatible with the Gospel of God’s love expressed in Jesus Christ.

In recent years, gay men and lesbians have begun to come out of their closets and enter our seminaries. By rejecting them for ordination, we are robbing the United Methodist Church of a God-given talent base, in much the same way we denied our church the gifts of ordained women pastors for far too long. The rejection of qualified gay and lesbian candidates also has the effect

of unwittingly, yet inevitably, colluding with a society too often bent on individual and collective violence toward homosexuals.

In the name of God, we are called to be community-makers and barrier-breakers. The time is at hand.

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## CHAPTER TEN

# Why should the church allow same-sex marriage?

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*Who shall ascend to the hill of the Lord,  
Who shall stand in God's holy place?  
Those who have clean hands and a pure heart,  
Who have not lifted up their souls unto vanity.*  
— Psalm 24:3-4

**O**f all the issues confronting the United Methodist Church as it seeks to relate to its gay and lesbian members, perhaps the most difficult is Christian marriage. For the vast majority of heterosexuals, marriage is the most intimate, personal dimension of our selves. The traditions



and feelings surrounding marriage are at the very heart of our lives – from earliest childhood, when we observe the marriage of our parents, to our own experiences as adults, when we choose our mates. In fact, many heterosexuals who are deeply committed to the full inclusion of homosexuals in the life and ministry of the church turn squeamish about the idea of two people of the same sex getting married.

Nevertheless, if we wish to deal fairly and honestly with gay men and lesbians, to treat them as “persons of sacred worth,” we must look with fresh eyes on what the church should do regarding marriage. In doing so, we need to focus our attention on the appropriate role the church should play, not as a functionary of the state, but as Christ’s body on earth. And if we are to be Christ’s body – that vessel making real God’s kingdom in the world – we must join with the Psalmist in asking:

Who is qualified to stand before the altar of the church seeking God’s blessing?

What a haunting question for anyone who claims to follow Jesus Christ. Surely the answer must simultaneously be “no one,” and – because of God’s act in Jesus Christ – “everyone.”

In the United Methodist Church, the qualification for heterosexual couples seeking to marry is little more than their desire to enter into a committed relationship based on mutual love, honor, and respect. There is no requirement of Christian discipleship, and, in most cases, no requirement even of church membership.

From a theological perspective, this lack of requirement is not surprising. The Christian church is a community of faith called into being through God’s grace. We trust that God is the judge of our qualifications, and we have been assured, through the life and ministry of Jesus, that God welcomes all.

Given this openness, it is all the more confusing that the United Methodist Church has determined to deny the altar to people of the same sex regardless of any other qualification. The desire for a loving and committed relationship, the desire to

form a family and live within the care of a faith community – none of it makes any difference.

Make no mistake: Despite the degrading stereotypes, there is no doubt that homosexuals with such wholesome desires exist in abundance. Thousands of gay couples have publicly, and at some personal risk, identified themselves as committed and loving partners and now are asking for the church's understanding and blessing.

How does the Bible direct us on this issue? Interestingly, it has very little to say about any religious wedding ceremonies, and few – if any appear – in Scripture. In fact, today's wedding tradition actually evolved out of a postscript to what was considered a legal formality. In medieval times, after a couple established their marriage under the law by exchanging vows (often on the porch of the church), they entered the church to file a record of their legal agreement and to receive a blessing.

Out of that simple ritual grew what we know as the modern wedding, an elaborate event with major legal and religious components. Yet, in spite of the ways we may perceive these two components to be intertwined, they remain distinctly separate. When the church carries out its proper religious role, it is celebrating the event of two people committing themselves to a life-long, monogamous relationship, and it is offering its support and blessing to the couple. The state's refusal to grant legal status to marriages between people of the same sex should not inhibit the church from exercising its role to celebrate and to bless such relationships. Truly, the only inhibiting factor is a handful of Bible passages fraught with ambiguity on the subject of homosexuality.

So we must ask ourselves: If we believe that sexual expression is God's "good gift" to all, and if we believe a committed, monogamous relationship is the moral example with which the church witnesses to the world, then why is celibacy the only choice that faithful homosexuals have been given by the church? Why is the church denying its blessing?

And how can this denial be considered a moral stance when it also sends the implicit message that committed same-sex partnerships simply don't matter?

Rather than maligning such acts of devotion, the church would be better served rejoicing in the existence of all couples, homosexual and heterosexual, who wish to stand before the altar.

Surely it's time to rethink the church's decisions on these issues, to bring our practice in line with our theology, and to allow the church's clergy to exercise their pastoral responsibility to serve all under their care, regardless of sexual orientation.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### If the church makes these changes, won't the future of the denomination be threatened?

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What we know for certain is that the future of the denomination would be *altered*. We can expect some churches to rejoice that United Methodism has put aside a discriminatory thorn in its own flesh. We can expect some churches to withdraw from the United Methodist Church out of their own sense of what is biblically faithful. We can expect some churches to be thrown into a new round of discernment.

The larger issue is whether denominational turbulence can serve a godly purpose. For me, the answer is *yes*. When I disagree with you, at least three things can happen: I can come to understand my own position better; I can come to understand your position better; or I can fail to learn more either about myself or you.

If I resolve to understand my own position better, I become a better partner in dialogue. I have the opportunity to be more genuine with you because I can move beyond attacking you

and on to representing my own belief. I also have the opportunity – through prayer, study, and Christian conversation – to strengthen my overall walk with God and my knowledge of God’s will as revealed in the Bible.

If I resolve to understand your position better, I am less likely to engage in demonizing you. I view you as one who is as faithful to the task of discerning God’s will as I am attempting to be.

God help me if I do neither.

There is much talk going on now that all matters related to homosexuality should be tabled. I hope and pray that this will not happen. If the faith of those who wish to see the church’s position changed is seen as an impediment to getting on with “the real business of the church” (a phrase used regularly these days), then that means part of the real business of the church is silencing discussion on a monumental issue.

As people of faith, we must believe that silencing dialogue is much more threatening to Christian community than the fracture of the United Methodist Church.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### How can the church heal on this issue?

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Christians are people of conviction. They follow the word of God as they understand it, even when that means standing against a world where many hardly know what they believe and few stand for anything. That makes them powerful witnesses, but it can also divide them bitterly against one another. The history of the church is a story of such conflicts. In the United States, we have endured turmoils over such issues as slavery, segregation, and economic injustice. Today, we face controversies over the role of women and over human sexuality. Faithful participation in the church requires us to take a stand on these issues, but it also requires us to think about healing and reconciliation.

The first thing that Christians in conflict must remember is that *final judgment belongs to God*. The One whose purpose is to unite all things in Christ (Colossians 1:15-20) is working to-

ward that end, even in our divisions. We will participate in this final reconciliation, but we cannot set the terms for it.

That does not mean we should dispense with our judgments and just wait for God to act. God acts through our discernment, our arguments, and our efforts to understand what God is saying. Our judgments are *important*. But they are not *final*.

This is not to suggest that God's judgment changes. It is our knowledge in this life that is always imperfect, even when we are aided by the Holy Spirit. "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face" (I Corinthians 13:12a). Healing begins with knowing that our own sight is not yet clear, and expecting that what we will see, when we can see more clearly, will both astonish and delight us.

We do not yet know our neighbors as well as we will someday. We have not heard all that they have to say about their hopes and their hurts, about the loving that makes their lives meaningful, and about the faith that frees them from fear and despair. We do not yet understand how biology and experience work together to form the mysteries of human sexuality. We do not yet know what human relationships will work in a society that is both free and caring.

Also, we do not yet know ourselves. "Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (I Corinthians 13:12b). Our understanding of others is always tinged by our unspoken, and even unacknowledged, desires, fears, and expectations. That is part of what makes it so hard to confront real disagreements about human sexuality. Healing begins by knowing that whatever judgment God finally makes, it will fall on all of us.

Because Christians are people of conviction, the church must sometimes endure conflict. Our judgments are important. But the church endures because we know our judgments are not final. In the end, all things come together in God.