



# United Methodists Divided

The United Methodist Church is facing its most significant challenge since becoming a denomination 50 years ago. At the center of the debate is a polarizing difference of opinion – based largely on interpretations of the Bible and corresponding church doctrine – on homosexuality.

Dale McConkey is an associate professor of sociology at Berry College near Rome, Georgia, and is pastor of Mount Tabor United Methodist Church in Armuchee, Georgia. In this recently released book, he attempts to provide a balanced look at the progressive and traditionalist stances on homosexuality through the lenses of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral – scripture, tradition, experience and reason.

The book can be used as a guide, textbook or the basis for a small-group discussion, thanks to the inclusion of discussion questions found at the end of each of the six chapters.

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## IN THIS SUMMARY

- Issues surrounding the nation's culture war and official positions of the church.
- The differences in interpretation of the seven scriptures that specifically talk about homosexuality.
- Impacts of demographic shifts on the leanings of General Conference delegates.
- How progressives and traditionalists understand certain theological components involved in this disagreement.
- Plans beyond the three proposed for the special session.

# CHAPTER 1 – How Are We Divided?

Dr. McConkey starts by sharing methods and motivation. As both a sociologist and a pastor, he makes it clear to the reader that he hopes to educate from both angles, but he also is clear that his primary motivation is his love for The United Methodist Church. He echoes what is often heard in UMC circles when he says:

“I love The United Methodist Church. For virtually all of my life I have been a member of this denomination, and throughout life’s journey United Methodist brothers and sisters in Christ have molded and nurtured my faith. It is a humbling honor to currently serve as a local pastor in a small country church.”

McConkey explains to the reader that the church has long taken a two-pronged stance on human sexuality. It affirms that all people, including LGBTQ persons, are of sacred worth. But it also affirms that such a lifestyle is incompatible with Christian teaching. He uses these two seemingly contradictory statements found within the Book of Discipline to frame the current dispute.

He touches briefly on history associated with the formation of the Commission on a Way Forward and how some more progressive conferences have chosen to take a stance of non-conformity, with traditionalists responding with the formation of the Wesleyan Covenant Association, perhaps as a means of expediting the launch of a new denomination if they do not like the outcome of the special session of the 2019 special session of General Conference.

## CULTURE WAR

He characterizes the two sides’ arguments with two pieces of scripture:

- Traditionalists – “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.” (Hebrews 13:8)
- Progressives – “See, I am doing a new thing!” (Isaiah 43:19)

Upon taking note of how human sexuality has caused splits in other denominations, he lays out statistics to illustrate the ongoing changes in society.

### General Social Survey

(University of Chicago, Gallup, Pew)

	Same-sex relations are always wrong	Same-sex relations are not wrong at all
1973	74%	11%
2016	39%	53%

McConkey points out that the tipping point came in or near 2010, when polls showed more people in support of marriage equity in the United States than those who opposed it. The 2015 Supreme Court

decision establishing same-sex marriage as a right further tipped the scales, and as of 2017 about 67 percent of Americans support marriage equality, though with smaller numbers in the South and Midwest and more fitting that profile in the western United States and in the northeast corridor of the country.

## **OFFICIAL POSITIONS OF THE CHURCH**

The introduction includes a brief overview of the six positions spelled out in the Book of Discipline. The first two have nearly universal agreement from people on both sides:

1. All people are of sacred worth. (¶161G)
2. All people deserve equal rights. (¶161H)

He then explains the divisiveness of the issue:

3. Homosexuality is not compatible with Christian teachings. (¶161F and ¶161G)
4. Pastors cannot officiate same-sex weddings. (¶332.6)
5. The church will not ordain self-avowed practicing homosexuals. (¶304.3)
6. Church agencies will not fund homosexual causes (pro- or anti-) (¶613, ¶806.9)

The introduction concludes with a look at terminology. For the purposes of the book, when he is talking about a specific side, he uses that group's preferred wording to avoid derogatory name-calling. For example, when talking from the traditional view, he uses terms such as "same-sex attraction" or "same-sex preference." When both are involved, he uses the term "homosexuality" because of the use of that word within the current Book of Discipline.

The remainder of the book frames the issues facing the church over human sexuality through the theological framework of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral:

- Scripture – the Old and New Testaments
- Tradition – Reflects the witness and wisdom of the history of the Church and followers of Jesus who have gone before.
- Experience – Prompting and conviction of the Holy Spirit in our personal and corporate lives.
- Reason – Acknowledges the God-given gift of our intellect.

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## **CHAPTER 2 – SCRIPTURE: DIVIDED OVER THE BIBLE**

What do Jerry Falwell and Jesse Jackson have in common? These diametrically opposed men both share the same Lord and read the same Bible. Dr. McConkey starts his chapter on an in-depth look at biblical differences on the issue of homosexuality by explaining that the Bible is the foundation for discernment of religious truth for United Methodists.

Both sides tend to agree on one key aspect of biblical scripture: You are not likely to hear the Bible described as “inerrant” or “infallible” but rather “authoritative” or “trustworthy” or “reliable.”

The author notes seven specific passages of scripture that address homosexuality.

## **SODOM AND GOMORRAH**

*Referenced in Genesis 19:4-11 and Jude 7*

McConkey points out that neither side tends to spend much time on this verse because it deals more with gang rape and lack of hospitality than with same-sex experiences. And the Jude passage focuses more on immorality in general than in homosexuality specifically.

Jesus references the lack of hospitality in Matthew 10:14. And Ezekiel 16:49 focuses on greed and inattention to those in need when referencing the two Old Testament towns.

## **HOLINESS CODE**

*Referenced in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13*

From the Traditionalist point of view, these verses provide explicit condemnation of the practice of homosexuality. People from this point of view point out that homosexuality is listed among sexual sins such as adultery, incest and bestiality – all three of which are still viewed as sinful today.

Traditionalists do make a distinction, however, between feelings and behavior. McConkey points out that behavior, not attraction or feelings for people of the same sex, is the sin. Traditionalists urge people not to denounce people for having yearnings.

From the Progressive point of view, these verses are seen as culturally specific for the time and place for which the Mosaic Law was written. They point out that we no longer consider it a sin to eat shellfish or blend fabrics together for our clothing, therefore homosexuality no longer should be considered sinful.

McConkey notes that the debate over the Leviticus scriptures often centers on disagreements over the type of law these verses represent:

- Civil laws – needed to govern the people.
- Ceremonial, or “purity” laws – rituals meant to remain clean and holy before God.
- Moral laws – Timeless, ethical decrees.

Traditionalists view the prohibition on homosexuality to be a moral law that never expires, while progressives tend to view the prohibition as a ceremonial law that is no longer in effect.

## **PAUL’S LIST OF SINS**

*Referenced in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10*

McConkey starts by explaining that Paul uses two rare Greek terms: arsenokoitai and malakoi. The former appears to have been a joining of two words by Paul that mean “man” and “bed.” Traditionalists believe this new word, not found elsewhere in scripture, means Paul was talking about homosexuality –

or men lying with men. Progressives counter that the description from the two words is vague and may have instead referenced the practices of temple prostitution and pederasty, both of which were not uncommon in Paul's time.

The Greek word *malakoi* only appears in 1 Corinthians and means "soft." Progressives think the word refers to a person's demeanor, pointing to the King James Version translation of the word as "effeminate." Traditionalists counter that Paul likely used the word to denounce the masculine and effeminate partners in a homosexual encounter.

## **UNNATURAL RELATIONS AND CREATION**

*Referenced in Romans 1:24-27*

McConkey writes that many people see this passage of scripture as the focal point for disagreement, primarily because it appears in the New Testament, thus avoiding the dismissal arguments associated with the Old Testament prohibitions in Leviticus. As with most of Romans, this passage goes beyond a simple, single prohibition and frames the concept of homosexuality in a broader theological context. McConkey notes that this is the only scripture we have that specifically mentions lesbians.

In the Romans passage, Paul explores profound theological doctrine of sin and the human need for grace. Paul makes the argument that people abandoned God, so God let them degrade themselves.

In the Traditionalist view, supporting homosexuality "trades God's truth for a lie." They point out that the choice of words – with references to our "creator" and "natural" – are theologically crucial. The tie-in to the Genesis creation story makes a case for male-female sexual relations to be the natural order of existence because woman was made to serve as man's companion.

Progressives question the "unnatural sexual relations" referenced by Paul. Again, they reference the availability of prostitutes in pagan temples and the act of pederasty. They further state that people in Paul's time had no concept of a loving, long-term, committed relationship between same-sex couples. And scientific breakthroughs that indicate a biological link to same-gender attraction also brings into question the definition of the word "natural." After all, if a person is born attracted to people of their same gender, it would be "unnatural" for them to seek out a heterosexual relationship, progressives say.

## **FOCUSED ON JESUS**

One thing both sides agree on is that Jesus should be the focal point for our combined faith. McConkey points out that our Savior said nothing – at least based on what is recorded in the Gospels – about homosexuality.

Progressives look at this omission as an indication that the practice was not a concern for Jesus. They also believe that Jesus' call for love and compassion for others in the story of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25:31-46) supersedes rules and restrictions in other parts of scripture. After all, they point out, Jesus called for love of people at the fringes of society, and society has most definitely placed LGBTQ persons at the fringes of society.

Traditionalists counter that Jesus also was silent on rape and incest, likely because they were clearly sins that people should avoid. They point to Matthew 5:17, where Jesus says he came to uphold the Law and prophets. While they acknowledge that Jesus often ate and mingled with sinners and avoided condemning them for their actions, he also closed such encounters with instruction to “go and sin no more.”

### **BIBLICAL OBEDIENCE AND CHURCH LAW**

McConkey closes the chapter on scripture by analyzing the sharply contrasting vision of what it means to be biblically obedient.

Traditionalists tend to say that Christians have a responsibility to use the gifts given by God for the way God intended. Progressives say they are willing to disobey unjust laws to remain loyal to the higher priority of God’s love.

The author does point out that some people, such as Adam Hamilton at Church of the Resurrection, have tried to find middle ground with concepts such as “God’s ideal will” versus “God’s circumstantial will,” but that such centrist movements have not been successful in gaining much traction. Traditionalists say the concept capitulates to society instead of standing firm on God’s truth. Progressives say the centrist opinion maintains second-class status for LGBTQ persons.

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## **CHAPTER 3 – TRADITION: DIVIDED OVER THE CHURCH’S PAST**

McConkey begins his look at tradition by explaining the deep roots many United Methodists have with their denomination. He also quotes ¶105 of the Book of Discipline: “The theological task does not start anew in each age or each person.” Rather than fashioning our faith from scratch, he says, Christians are the beneficiaries of generations of faithful disciples of Jesus Christ who have gone before us.

### **CHURCH HISTORY: THE EARLY CHURCH**

Three foundational beliefs emerge almost immediately since the founding of the church:

1. The natural form of sexual desire is between a man and a woman.
2. God designed sexuality to be expressed between a man and a woman.
3. The purpose of sexual intimacy is procreation.

Jewish scholars such as Philo and Josephus wrote about homosexuality and influenced many early Christians, who took those writings as well as the Romans text in determining their views on the practice.

### **CHURCH HISTORY: MIDDLE AGES**

McConkey provides a brief history of how Christian emperors issued decrees banning men from

marrying other men or even acting like or as women. And penalties became swift and harsh. By the sixth century, people found to be homosexual could be burned at the stake. And Justinian, who led part of the Roman empire, feared Sodom-like destruction of his kingdom so he banned homosexuality as well. One of the best-known theologians of the time, Thomas Aquinas, viewed homosexuality as a “act against nature.”

McConkey introduces some research from Yale historian John Boswell, who suggest medieval Europe tolerated or even accepted homosexuality through adelphopoiesis – the joining of two men and two women. However, traditionalists believe this ceremony resulted not in a sexual relationship but more in a bond such as “blood brothers.”

### **CHURCH HISTORY: REFORMATION**

Two of the best-known leaders of the time – Martin Luther and John Calvin – viewed homosexuality as “unnatural.” It was during this time that homosexuality became a capital offense in parts of Europe and in the New World.

Progressives believe that despite the church’s history, now is the time for reform. They point to Old Testament prophets calling people to repent and change, Jesus confronting the legalistic Pharisees in Matthew 23:23, Phillip baptizing a eunuch who because of his condition would not be allowed into the temple courts, and the Council of Jerusalem’s acceptance of uncircumcised Gentiles.

McConkey writes that both sides agree the prophetic tradition is an integral part of the church’s witness to God’s expansive love and justice. But they disagree on the understanding of whether prophetic reach should include full inclusion of LGBTQ persons.

Progressives tend to see LGBTQ persons as marginalized, similar to how women and racial minorities once were in the church. Traditionalists disagree, citing Galatians 3:28, which they say provides equal footing regardless of gender or race, not on sexual practice.

### **WHAT DID JOHN WESLEY SAY?**

Despite his voluminous sermons and journal entries, John Wesley said almost nothing about homosexuality. In two places – a commentary on Romans 1:26-27 and in a commentary on Jude 7 – he makes references to “unnatural lust” in relation to homosexuality.

Traditionalists tend to focus on personal piety. They explain that the source of homosexual desires is unresolved and that attraction and passions can be resisted and controlled. One illustration is alcoholism. People suffering from alcoholism shouldn’t be blamed for their urges to use the substance, but they do have to show responsibility for their choices and actions.

Progressives tend to emphasize social justice. They explain that same-sex attraction is not merely that, attraction, but rather an orientation and identity. They identify with the Wesleyan tradition of working to alleviate oppression of groups throughout history and see the push for full inclusion of LGBTQ persons as another cause to support.

Another area of disagreement within the Wesleyan theological framework is the concept of “catholic spirit.” Wesley once said, “As to all opinions that do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think.” He also downplayed rigid dogmas when he wrote, “Orthodoxy, or right opinions, is at best a slender part of religion, if it can be allowed to be any part at all.” Progressives see those words as Wesley emphasizing areas of agreement over points of contention. Traditionalists, however, believe that idea misapplies Wesley’s words. The sermon from which it came, they say, came from a message about styles of worship and not doctrinal matters.

### **HISTORY AND DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS**

McConkey concludes the chapter on tradition by giving a brief history of the denomination’s struggles regarding the subject of human sexuality, almost from the moment the church initiated a commission on Social Principles in 1968. A timeline in narrative form walks readers through the dramatic change in wording in 1972 that provided what is now known as the “incompatibility clause,” through the present.

McConkey reasons that the push for progressives may be a moot point because of demographics. Declines in United Methodist membership have been less pronounced in the largely conservative South Central and South Eastern jurisdictions. More U.S. delegates now come from these conservative regions as a result. And Africa now has nearly one-third of delegates to the General Conference, and, McConkey says, “these delegates are almost unanimous in their opposition to homosexuality.”

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## **CHAPTER 4 – EXPERIENCE: DIVIDED OVER THE SPIRIT’S WORK**

McConkey begins his chapter on experience by explaining its role in the theological framework related to John Wesley. Often quoted, Wesley noted that his “heart felt strangely warmed” by the Holy Spirit. The Book of Discipline elaborates that United Methodists use experience to reveal “confirmations of the realities of God’s grace attested in scripture.” McConkey notes two significant aspects of experience in this context: It relates to both individual and corporate events, and it informs our theological understanding.

The author begins by disclosing that the chapter is not likely to be viewed as balanced as much as the others because progressives invoke experience far more often and more broadly than traditionalists. Progressives, he says, believe sharing experiences reveals God’s living grace in their lives and is a testament to new life God is giving – a new life for them and for the church.

### **PERSONAL STORIES**

McConkey shares brief but moving stories of people involved in the LGBTQ push for full inclusion. These include:

- Deborah Morgan – A woman who says the church’s “don’t ask don’t tell” policy became the only viable option for her and her partner to serve as ministry leaders.

- Elyse Ambrose – A woman who sees her coming-out story as a way of stepping into the presence of God and a way for her to show others that they are not alone.
- Oneida C. – A woman rejected by her family after coming out but who found community and acceptance in an affirming United Methodist congregation.
- Karen Oliveto – The first openly LGBTQ bishop elected in The United Methodist Church. McConkey quotes from her book: “As long as the lives of LGBTQ persons are reduced to an ‘issue’ it is easy to discount the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives.”

Traditionalists don’t discount the experiences, but they do think progressives define experience more broadly than people of the Wesleyan tradition have historically understood the concept. Traditionalists believe progressives have made experience too prominent in their theological thinking. Scholar Bill Arnold makes the case that Wesley intended experience to serve as confirmation of truth revealed in scripture and tradition, not to stand on its own.

There are some Traditionalist experiences shared by McConkey as well. They include Susan McDonald, who spoke at the California-Pacific Annual Conference about once living as a lesbian but then adopting a heterosexual lifestyle, saying “It isn’t true that you can’t change.” Short stories of two men – Christopher Adams and a colleague of Rob Renfroe – detail decisions to remain celibate, making a distinction between homosexual desires and taking part in homosexual acts.

McConkey also writes about specific cases in the history of The United Methodist Church:

- Jimmy Creech – Charged in 1997 of taking part in a ceremony for two women (acquitted) and then in 1999 of officiating a ceremony for two men (convicted and defrocked).
- Ed Johnson – A pastor who would not allow an LGBTQ person to become a member of his Virginia church. The Judicial Council sided with him, but on the basis of pastoral authority, not on membership of LGBTQ persons.
- Karen Dammann and Beth Stroud – Two women in different cases who were found to be guilty of the “incompatibility clause” and were not allowed to serve as pastors.
- Amy DeLong – Faced a complaint after officiating a ceremony for two women but then disclosed she herself was in a legal domestic partnership. She was found guilty of the officiating but not of being a “self-avowed practicing homosexual.”
- Melvin Talbot – A retired bishop who encouraged “biblical disobedience,” he married two people and was charged. But his case was resolved prior to trial, and he apologized for his actions.

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## CHAPTER 5 – REASON: DIVIDED OVER EVIDENCE

“He died to take away your sins, not your mind.” Thus reads a poster McConkey quotes to start a chapter that lays out the intellectual divide between Traditionalists and Progressives.

McConkey takes the reader back to 1976, when a proposal to study human sexuality denomination-wide was introduced at General Conference. Concerns over methodology, money and metrics led to its demise. Fast-forward to 1988, when the Committee to Study Homosexuality was adopted. What the study found:

- Like today, scholars then didn't agree on the seven scriptures that explicitly note homosexuality (see chapter 2 of this document).
- No consensus was found regarding morality of same-sex relations.
- There was widespread agreement that gay and lesbian people face discrimination, stigmatization and oppression – and that the church has a responsibility to ensure fundamental human rights are protected.
- Scientific dimensions were not conclusive, such as the definition of “normal,” causes of homosexuality, feasibility of altering one's sexual orientation or the advisability of encouraging a change in one's sexual identity.
- Agreement was reached that homosexuality does not hinder parenting effectiveness, does not mean someone is prone to abuse or violence, and risky behaviors are unsafe for all people, regardless of sexual orientation.

The commission made four conclusions:

1. The seven biblical passages are not “definitive Christian teachings” because they represent ancient cultural practices, not enduring ethical declarations.
2. Scientific evidence refutes the notion that homosexuality is a type of pathology, development flaw or deviant behavior.
3. Emerging scholarly views in biblical, theological and ethical studies affirm same-sex relationships that are “covenantal, committed and monogamous.”
4. The first three conclusions are further supported by the witness of God's grace in the lives of gay and lesbian Christians.

The majority report from the commission recommended removing the “incompatibility clause,” but the action was never taken. In the end, the 1992 General Conference voted to accept the report, but did not approve the report.

## **DEFINITION DISPUTE**

The two sides even disagree on something that seems as elementary as the meaning of “homosexual.” What both sides do agree on is they don't like the use of the word at all.

Traditionalists believe the word equates to an enduring personal trait. They prefer to use the phrases “same-sex preference” or “same-sex attraction” to emphasize the willful, volitional nature of homosexual behavior. They see the word – first coined in 1869 by Hungarian journalist Karl-Maria Kertbeny – created a label for behavior that existed throughout history. Progressives believe the word conjures images of clinical diagnoses and point out that the use of the LGBTQ initials rally a coalition of various sexual orientations. They see the word's creation as a landmark moment that revealed a previously hidden dimension of human identity.

McConkey then gives a brief history of homosexuality related to psychiatry. In 1952, the practice was classified as a mental disorder. By 1968, it has been “downgraded” to a sexual deviation. By 1973, it was removed from the list of mental illnesses, a decision that progressives equate to a triumph of reason and rationality but that traditionalists question because of political pressures pushed to make those changes.

## **NATURE VERSES NURTURE**

McConkey goes on to provide some short comparisons on the topics of causes, moral implications changing orientation and complementarity through the eyes of one progressive (Dale Dunlap), one traditionalist (Howard Snyder) and one centrist (Adam Hamilton).

### **Causes**

- Progressives – Lean toward innate, inherited factors.
- Traditionalists – Believe genetics may play a factor, but they also believe life experiences can play a key role.
- Centrists – Some determinations are made in utero and some from the childhood environment. Exposure to pornography or sexual experimentation may play a role for some people.

### **Moral Implications**

- Progressives – If LGBTQ persons don't choose, then their orientation must be part of one's nature. Accepting their orientation is accepting the way God has created them.
- Traditionalists – Social trends, cultural context and particular experience can lead heterosexuals to homosexual behavior. The analogy of an alcoholic is used to explain that LGBTQ persons may not be able to change their behavior, but they are responsible for the consequences of that behavior.
- Centrists – Some same-sex intimacy is the result of sinful behavior by heterosexuals who are misusing God's gift of sexuality. Perhaps homosexual relationships are not God's "ideal will" but such relationships can reflect God's "circumstantial will" if they live lives that embody sacrificial, covenantal love expected in Christian marriage.

### **Can Identity Change?**

- Progressives – They are skeptical and often critical of the idea of changing orientation.
- Traditionalists – They note a 2007 study that indicates changing orientation may be possible.
- Centrists – No view was shared by the author.

### **Complementarity**

- Progressives – They note that there is no admonition for non-complementary sex acts between heterosexual partners.
- Traditionalists – They say it is reasonable to rationalize that since homosexuality has no possibility of reproduction that it is unnatural.
- Centrists – No view was shared by the author.

## **CULTURE SHIFTS**

McConkey notes that the Industrial Revolution ushered in secularism, pluralism, individualism and civil rights. Automation replaced workers, and families shrunk from seven children per mother to less than two in a 200-year span. Most of these changes minimized the role of the church in a society that has advanced quickly from the first recognition of same-sex marriage in 2001 in the Netherlands to the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case legalizing gay marriage nationwide in 2015.

## **CHAPTER 6 – RESOLVING OUR DIVISIONS?**

The image of a broken communion chalice – one that was damaged in a 2004 protest on the General Conference floor in Pittsburgh – often is seen as an illustration of the state of the current United Methodist Church.

McConkey provides a brief history of the 2016 General Conference in Portland and the first time that bishops were asked to intervene on proceedings. The result was the formation of the Commission on a Way Forward. But in the few months between the close of the General Conference and the announcement of the new commission, according to then-Council of Bishops President Bruce Ough, three significant developments greatly changed the landscape of the church: declarations of noncompliance, the election of an openly gay bishop and the formation of the Wesleyan Covenant Association.

### **NONCOMPLIANCE**

Of the 56 annual conferences in the United States, about a dozen took some kind of formal action to defy or decry the restrictions placed on LGBTQ persons in the Book of Discipline. Each annual conference in the Western Jurisdiction made some form of official declaration, as did some annual conferences in the Northeastern and a few in the North Central jurisdictions.

Likewise, some annual conferences responded in a more traditionalist way. The South Georgia Conference, for example, passed a motion requesting their bishop refuse to receive or appoint any clergy member who has publicly declared an intent to disregard the language in the book of Discipline regarding sexuality. And the Baltimore-Maryland Conference – typically viewed as a progressive region – rejected the ordination of a woman known to be a married lesbian.

### **ELECTION OF KAREN OLIVETO**

The Western Jurisdiction elected the denomination's first openly LGBTQ bishop when it voted for Karen Oliveto, pastor of the progressive Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco. Within minutes of her election, the South Central Jurisdiction petitioned the Judicial Council to determine whether Oliveto's consecration as a bishop violated church law. In a murky decision, the Judicial Council ruled that the Western Jurisdiction did violate church law by electing an openly gay person but that Oliveto remained in good standing until the completion of a formal review process. As of this author's writing, no action has been taken despite the ruling by the denomination's highest court.

### **WESLEYAN COVENANT ASSOCIATION**

This new orthodox group formed in October 2016 with a gathering of about 1,800 traditionalists in Chicago. The group emphasizes three commitments: Authority of scripture and the Lordship of Jesus Christ, a unified response to the recommendations of the Commission on a Way Forward, and developing a plan for a "positive and faithful" future.

The formation of this group heightens fears of schism because of the perception that the association is preparing to break from The United Methodist Church to form its own traditionalist denomination. McConkey notes that similar breaks have happened in other denominations that struggled with issues surrounding LGBTQ people: The Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

## **PLANS FOR A WAY FORWARD**

McConkey provides a summary of the One Church, Connectional Conferences and Traditional plans. The author also provides short summaries of other plans that have surfaced since legislation has been offered to the special session of General Conference. The three plans offered by the Commission on a Way Forward and the Council of Bishops include thoughts from the progressive and traditionalist perspectives below:

- One Church Plan – This plan, recommended by a majority of the members of the Council of Bishops, would maintain The United Methodist Church as a single denomination. The church would take no formal position regarding LGBTQ issues such as same-sex marriage. This means clergy and congregations would have a great deal of latitude to follow their own consciences and to effectively minister according to their local context. This plan would remove the restrictive language – including the “incompatibility clause” – from the Book of Discipline and would eliminate the possibility of church trials due to homosexual practice. Writes McConkey: “Thus, pastors who so desire would be permitted to perform same-sex weddings, and congregations that so desired could hold LGBTQ weddings in their sanctuaries. At the same time, the One Church Plan adds language to the Discipline that intentionally protects the religious freedom of pastors and churches who choose not to perform or host same-sex weddings.” Bishops are protected in the same way. The plan changes nothing for central conferences, many of which are located in areas in which homosexuality is illegal.
  - Progressives say the plan gives churches space they need to maximize the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible.
  - Traditionalists oppose the plan because they believe it compromises the church’s historic opposition to same-sex behavior.
- Connectional Conference Plan – This plan dissolves the five jurisdictions in the United States and replaces them with three values-based connectional conferences: progressive, traditional and unity. Each connectional conference would have its own policies regarding LGBTQ weddings and ordination. While certain foundational aspects of the Book of Discipline would remain in place for everyone, pastors who serve within a connectional conference would be expected to uphold the standards in that connectional conference’s adapted portions of the Book of Discipline. Traditional Conference pastors would not marry same-sex couples and could not be practicing homosexuals themselves. Progressive conference pastors would be expected to marry same-sex couples, and LGBTQ persons would be allowed to be ordained for pastoral ministry. The unity – or centrist – branch would be comprised of central conferences outside the United States and U.S. annual conferences, bishops, pastors and churches that choose not to take an official position on homosexuality. In that case, the pastors and congregations would decide individually, much like the proposed One Church Plan. Jurisdictional delegates would vote to join

one of the three connectional conferences. Annual conferences could vote to move to another connectional conference if they disagree with the jurisdiction's decision. Likewise, local churches could vote to move to another annual conference if they disagree with their current annual conference's decision.

- Progressives have voiced concerns that they would be affiliated with a denomination that permits a branch to prohibit LGBTQ people from getting married and being ordained.
  - Traditionalists have voiced concerns that the denomination would allow one of its branches to marry and ordain LGBTQ people.
- Traditional Plan – This plan maintains the current stance of the church regarding the definition of marriage and advocates for a unified moral position on the issues of marriage and sexuality for the denomination. The plan maintains that LGBTQ persons are welcome to attend worship services, participate in church programs, receive the sacraments and join as members. It also maintains the current prohibitions on marriage and ordination. The Traditional Plan places an emphasis on enforcement of the Book of Discipline's standards, with each pastor, bishop, congregation and annual conference certifying they will adhere to the denomination's standards. The plan acknowledges the "sincere and conscientious objections some people have to the church's current stance and practices regarding homosexuality," McConkey writes. It allows for those who choose to leave the denomination to maintain a close affiliation with The United Methodist Church via a concordat agreement. Churches that disagree with their annual conference's decision to adhere to or disregard the denomination's stance on homosexuality would be able to make a similar decision.
  - Progressives largely feel like this plan banishes them from the denomination, "striking some as harsh and exclusionary," McConkey writes.
  - Traditionalists believe this plan holds true to the scriptural and historic teachings about homosexuality.
- Simple Plan – Similar to the One Church Plan, it calls for the striking of all language restricting LGBTQ persons from ordination and from being married in a United Methodist Church. Pastors who oppose same-sex marriage would have the freedom to decline such ceremonies.
- Exit Path – Says McConkey: "Though the Wesleyan Covenant Association makes it clear on its website that the organization did not submit any formal petitions for the 2019 special General Conference, prominent traditionalist leaders such as their president did." This legislation would make it possible for local churches to disaffiliate with The United Methodist Church if a supermajority of church members declare they have "irreconcilable conflict for reasons of conscience."
- Plan of Dissolution – McConkey says the WCA President Keith Boyette submitted a plan of dissolution. The legislation says the impasse has become so great that only dissolving the denomination will rectify the situation. It's believed that at least two denominations – one traditional and one progressive – would form, with a potential for a third, centrist denomination. If this plan passes, the 2020 General Conference would be for the sole purpose of dissolving The United Methodist Church.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is appropriate to close this summary as McConkey closes his book:

“We will have a much better idea of how the story ends — or at least how it proceeds — in February 2019. The decisions that our denomination makes in the coming months will have far-reaching implications for the witness of the church in the United States and across the world. And yet, as significant as this moment is, our divisions and decisions concerning homosexuality are only a tiny part of a much larger, much grander story, a story that spans before the start of human history, and indeed, unfolds beyond the reach of space and time. In the bleakest of circumstances, our faith reminds us to turn our eyes upon Jesus and to place our trust in the Triune God who creates us, redeems us, sustains us, and transforms us. As a people called United Methodist, we can take comfort from John Wesley’s dying words, ‘Best of all, God is with us.’”