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VEHSTEDT: CONTINUITY IN THE FACE OF CHANGE



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Scott Vehstedt

CONTINUITY IN THE FACE OF SOCIAL CHANGE:
DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS AND THE UNITED
METHODIST CHURCH'S INSTITUTIONAL
CONSERVATISM ON SEXUALITY

INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the Gay Liberation movement that flourished during the 1960s and 1970s, Protestant churches were forced to grapple with crafting policies toward homosexuality. As gay men and women demanded acceptance in the public sphere, so too did they demand it in matters of theology. Although sexual preference was historically a matter that the United Methodist Church (UMC) left to parishioners and their local clergy, the rise of LGBTQ activism brought non-heteronormative sexuality into the mainstream of politics, culture, and religion.¹ Throughout the 1970s Protestant denominations, including the UMC, were forced to address this cultural shift through policy.

In 1972, after long and anguishing debate, the UMC introduced language into the *Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* stating homosexuality to be incompatible with Christian teachings despite also calling homosexuals “persons of sacred worth” in need of “ministry and guidance.”² This language, seemingly ambivalent, was born of

¹ Dorothy Lowe Williams and United Methodist Church (U.S.) Committee to Study Homosexuality, *The Church Studies Homosexuality: A Study for the United Methodist Groups Using the Report of the Committee to Study Homosexuality* (Nashville: Cokesbury, 1994), 5.

² John L. Schreiber, ed., *Journal of the 1972 General Conference of The United Methodist Church: Volume I* (The General Conference of The United Methodist Church, 1972), 1057, accessed March 17, 2013, <http://archive.org/stream/journalatlantal01unit#page/n5/mode/2up>. The

compromise between pro- and anti-LGBTQ inclusion factions. It was then adopted by the General Conference, the central legislative body of the church that meets every four years to make policy and law for Methodists worldwide. Originally conceived in 1790, the General Conference is less an authoritative body than a populist one; it has historically allowed individual localities to craft their own policies. This has afforded Methodists tremendous leeway in their theology.³ The UMC's position on homosexuality does not afford such leeway and has thus become the most divisive issue in the church since slavery.

This study seeks to address the query of why Methodism, a socially liberal denomination, has not adopted a more progressive stance toward the LGBTQ community, even as public opinion in the United States has shifted toward full acceptance. Since the more conservative 1970s, why have Methodists maintained their policy that homosexuality is incompatible with Christianity, even as they continue to endorse a litany of progressive positions on other issues?

At present, the most common interpretation of the UMC's view of LGBTQ sexuality is rooted in demographics. This is discussed at greater length in the next section, but since the 1960s, traditional mainline

Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church will be referenced as the *Book of Discipline* or just *Discipline* for the remainder. Methodism was adapted from the larger doctrine of the Church of England, maintaining many of the social principles, but removing some of the more dogmatic elements. All twenty-five of the denomination's founding principles can be found at: The United Methodist Church, *The Articles of Religion of the United Methodist Church*, accessed April 3, 2016, <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?mid=1648>.

³ James Dixon, *Methodism in America* (London: Sold by John Mason, 1849), 217-221. British Methodist historian James Dixon, who chronicled his journey through America, offered an intriguing analysis of this establishment. Noting that English Methodists are legally obligated to maintain the tenants of John Wesley, Dixon reflected that American Methodists were reluctant to use their church as a political tool. The delegation seemed less interested in "governing" and more interested in acquiescing to policies that would keep the constituents happy. Dixon attributed this modesty in the use of authority to the spirit of America in the late eighteenth century. As a foreign observer, his insightful evaluation is frequently cited by American Methodist historians.

religious institutions have experienced declining numbers of parishioners as both the secular left and the religious right have grown.⁴ More socially liberal congregations in the North and West (USA) have been hurt the most by this trend, leading to a relative increase in power for conservative congregations from the South and Midwest (USA) as well as overseas. This demographic shift in church membership suggests that the reason for the UMC's conservative position toward LGBTQ people is that the church has become more conservative as liberals have abandoned religion. Analysis of both the archival record and the votes of the General Conference for the past several decades portrays a different picture.

Focusing on the 1970s and early 1980s, this article demonstrates that demographic shifts cannot be enough to explain why the church has not adopted a more liberal position toward the LGBTQ community. Since 1972, the percentage of delegates to the General Conference representing more conservative southern and African delegations has risen starkly. Yet over this same period, the General Conference has edged closer to revoking the "incapability" language than it ever did when the denomination was evenly divided between liberals and conservatives. During the 1970s, when the proscriptions against homosexuality were initially passed and strengthened, the North and South maintained near parity in their balance of power.⁵

⁴ Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 3–5; E. J. Dionne Jr., *Souled Out: Reclaiming Faith and Politics After the Religious Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 32–33.

⁵ See Figure 1. Sources: See John L. Schreiber, ed., *Journal of the 1972 General Conference of The United Methodist Church: Volume I* (The General Conference of The United Methodist Church, 1972), accessed March 17, 2013, <http://archive.org/stream/journalatlantal01unit#page/n5/mode/2up>; John L. Schreiber, ed., *Journal of the 1976 General Conference of the United Methodist Church: Volume I* (The General Conference of the United Methodist Church, 1976), accessed April 12, 2013, <http://archive.org/stream/journalportland01unit#page/n5/mode/2up>; John L. Schreiber, ed., *Journal of the 1984 General Conference of the United Methodist Church: Volume I* (The General Conference of the United Methodist Church, 1984), accessed April 12, 2013, <http://www.archive.org/details/journalbaltimore01unit>; *Daily Christian*

While the General Conference did not track its floor votes until 1980, and kept somewhat sporadic records thereafter, analysis of the existing records between 1980 and 1996 demonstrates that even as northern membership declined and the South became more ascendant in the General Conference, the votes toward LGBTQ issues became closer. In 1980 three-quarters of General Conference delegates voted to retain the UMC's incompatibility language, but by 1996 support fell to only 60 percent.⁶ Furthermore, the conservative foreign delegation did not gain more than 10 percent of the vote share until 1992, two decades after homosexuality was first codified as incompatible with Christianity, making its influence minimal.

Advocate (Nashville, Tennessee: The General Conference of the United Methodist Church, 1988.), accessed March 26, 2012, <http://www.archive.org/details/journalstlouis01unit>; *Daily Christian Advocate* (Nashville, Tennessee: The General Conference of the United Methodist Church, 1992.), accessed March 26, 2012, <http://www.archive.org/details/journallouisville01unit>; *Daily Christian Advocate* (Nashville, Tennessee: The General Conference of the United Methodist Church, 1996), accessed March 26, 2012, <http://www.archive.org/details/journaldenver01unit>; *Daily Christian Advocate* (Nashville, Tennessee: The General Conference of the United Methodist Church, accessed March 26, 2012, 2000), <http://www.archive.org/details/journalcleveland01unit>; The United Methodist Church, *General Conference Delegates By Jurisdiction*, accessed March 12, 2013, <http://www.gc2004.org/interior.asp?ptid=17&mid=3660>; The United Methodist Church, *The United Methodist Church 2008 General Conference Delegate Distribution*, accessed March 12, 2013, http://www.umc.org/atf/cf/%7BDB6A45E4-C446-4248-82C8-E131B6424741%7D/2008_DELEGATE_COUNT-2007-05-30.PDF, and The United Methodist Church, *2012 General Conference of the United Methodist Church*, accessed March 12, 2013, http://www.umc.org/atf/cf/%7Bdb6a45e4-c446-4248-82c8-e131b6424741%7D/2012GC_DELEGATE_DISTRIBUTION_11-30-2010.PDF. I was unable to acquire the delegate totals for 1980.

⁶ Amanda Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church: New Approaches in Sociology* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 194.



Likewise, if demographic shifts were enough to explain the church's conservative stance on homosexuality, then one would expect the UMC to have reversed its liberal stance on a slew of other issues such as its pro-choice stance on abortion, its pro-gun control position, its call for civil rights for minorities, its consistent admonition against war, or its support for universal healthcare as a fundamental right. True enough that it is more difficult to change an existing policy than to craft a new one, but the blanket adoption of liberal positions and relative lack of challenge to them suggests that the exclusion of full rights for the LGBTQ community is a divisive outlier in an otherwise progressive social creed.

In place of the demographic shift thesis, this article argues that the desire for unity and continuity led more liberal congregations to accept the church's conservative position on homosexuality in exchange for certain concessions, such as welcoming LGBTQ parishioners into the church and recognizing LGBTQ civil rights. Indeed, it was liberals who brought homosexuality up for debate in 1972, hoping to have a civil rights plank for LGBTQ peoples adopted by the General Conference. While they succeeded in promoting gay rights in society they inadvertently opened the door to the incapability language in the church.

The history of the UMC is one of schisms and mergers and neither liberals nor conservatives wish to see the church suffer a schism over questions of sexuality. This has led to a series of compromises in which the church has presented mixed messages to members of the LGBTQ. The record of the General Conference demonstrates that when the "incapability" and "sacred worth" language was adopted in 1972 by the UMC, no one was particularly happy. However, the compromise allowed

both liberals and conservatives to save face, and more importantly, stay united. This was extremely important to a denomination that had only unified in 1968 with the union of the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUBC), two Wesleyan bodies that shared similar doctrine.⁷ The statements of the delegates to the General Conference show conclusively that unity was on everyone's mind.

Beginning with a brief review of some of the literature on this topic, I will explore the otherwise liberal positions of the UMC, before examining how and why Methodists amended the *Discipline* in 1972. I will also demonstrate through analysis of the church's records that Methodists are not becoming more conservative per se, so much as they are attempting to appease both liberal and conservative membership through crafting specific policies and statements. The article will explore how and why Methodists have preferred imperfect and ambiguous policies that maintain unity to possible schism and theological purity. In so doing, this article attempts to make an important intervention that helps us understand how the history of the UMC has informed Methodist attitudes toward dealing with complex theological grievances and disagreements without offering an argument that is too broadly rooted in Protestant traditions in general.

INTERPRETING THE UMC'S TREATMENT OF UMC POLICIES TOWARD LGBTQ PEOPLE

The UMC's 1972 decision rests at the intersection of several strands of history, including the history of Protestantism, American culture, and of the church itself. It is on this last count, that scholarship has thus fallen short. Existing literature tends to rely too heavily on trends relating to Protestantism in general, as produced by broad cultural and demographic shifts in the United States. On the other side of the spectrum, scholars and theologians argue narrowly about the theological debate; what is the true interpretation of the Bible's stance on homosexuality? This article will not weigh in on this question but, as I will later point out,

⁷ Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1972), 6. At the completion of this merger, the UMC became the largest mainline Protestant denomination in the United States with a membership of almost twelve million parishioners. Nearly nine out of ten members of the UMC came from the Methodist Church.

examine how Methodists have concluded that the evidence is largely inconclusive.

Since the end of the Civil War, American Protestantism has been divided into a, “Two-Party System,” separated between Evangelical or “orthodox” factions and mainline or “modernist” factions. By the early twentieth century, this division was acute as Evangelicals adopted an ever-more literalist view of religion, while the mainline denominations attempted to bridge theology with science, history, and culture.⁸ The UMC held a rather unique place in this fight as it straddled the line between Evangelical and mainline, with its southern congregations adopting more of the former and its northern congregations the latter. Still, there was not much infighting between the two sections in part because of the pluralistic nature of Methodism. Mainline denominations, including most Methodists, adopted a social gospel catered to making sense of the world around them in naturalistic and tolerant terms.⁹ This feature of Methodism became essential to understanding how Methodists would deal with the debate over homosexuality.

In the late twentieth century, Protestantism was forced to grapple with crafting policies regarding homosexuality. The United Presbyterian Church, Presbyterian Church US, Disciples of Christ, Episcopal Church, American Lutheran Church, as well as others, all launched studies of homosexuality at some point during the 1970s. The denominations mostly supported LGBTQ rights in society, while denying full acceptance within the respective churches. Protestants tended to also ban openly gay clergy. One notable exception was the United Church of Christ, which not only supported LGBTQ rights, but also became the first denomination to ordain an openly gay candidate.¹⁰ The Protestant reaction to the homosexuality debate was so widespread that, as Wendy Cadge points out, “By the end of the 1970s, all of the mainline churches except the American Baptists had

⁸ James L. Guth, John C. Green, Corwin E. Smidt, Lyman A. Kellstedt, and Margaret M. Poloma, *The Bully Pulpit: The Politics of Protestant Clergy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰ Jeannine Gramick and Robert Nugent, “Homosexuality: Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish Issues; A Fishbone Tale” in Richard Hasbany, ed., *Homosexuality and Religion* (New York: Haworth Press, 1989), 21-23.

made a formal denominational statement about homosexuality.”¹¹ Indeed, mainline churches may not have been able to offer the LGBTQ people the ecclesiastical comfort they desired, but they were integral in opening up avenues of debate and discussion that provided some measure of safe space.¹²

Since the 1970s, the number of parishioners in liberal congregations has declined. Sociologists and conservative theologians have argued that the UMC’s policy on homosexuality can be explained by this fact.¹³ These authors note that membership rates in the southern jurisdictions have remained relatively stable, while the more liberal northern and western congregations decline in membership each year. The conservatives argue that liberal congregations lost membership because they retreated from the core doctrine of traditional Biblical interpretation. Precisely because of the ecumenical, doctrine-diluted nature of liberal churches, members asked themselves why they needed religion at all. The result was that beginning in the late 1950s, some liberals abandoned religion altogether, while others sought structure through the more rigid doctrine offered by conservatives. The large African ministry further bolsters support for conservatives as the socially conservative Africans comprise most of the foreign delegation.¹⁴ While there is a certain *prima facie* truth to this narrative, the emphasis on the decline of liberal religion represents a retroactive narrative with little explanatory power. It does not, for instance, explain why mainline denominations continue to endorse liberal positions on a host of other issues.

¹¹ Wendy Cadge, “Vital Conflicts: The Mainline Denominations Debate Homosexuality,” in *The Quiet Hand of God: Faith-Based Activism and the Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*, ed. Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 269.

¹² *Ibid.*, 271.

¹³ See Dave Shiflett, *Exodus: Why Americans Are Fleeing Liberal Churches for Conservative Christianity* (New York: Sentinel, 2005); Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1972); and Douglas E. Cowan, *The Remnant Spirit: Conservative Reform in Mainline Protestantism* (Connecticut: Praeger, 2003).

¹⁴ See Bruce W. Robbins, *A World Parish?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).

Of course, not everyone accepts that liberal religion is truly in decline.¹⁵ Those more optimistic about liberal religion, such as theologian and historian Thomas E. Frank, believed that it was the pessimism surrounding mainline denominations that contributed to a perpetual “rhetoric of crisis.”¹⁶ Frank argued that much of the statistical evidence demonstrating the decline of Protestantism could be attributed to the decline in birthrates after the baby boomer generation, a point echoed by Robert Wuthnow and John Evans.¹⁷ Frank also argued that mainline denominations, in being so closely akin to American culture, truly represent the core values of American society. By this, Frank is referring to the fact that mainline denominations have tended to espouse policy positions more in keeping with popular politics in the United States. Indeed, as the authors of *Bully Pulpit* relate in an anecdote about just how mainstream mainline denomination are, when President Theodore Roosevelt wanted to meet with a, “typical American audience” he would go “to a Methodist Church.”¹⁸ They go on to refer to Methodists as the “solid center” of American religious life.¹⁹

Likewise, most political and social leaders in the United States were members of mainline denominations, not evangelicals. It was only because Evangelical churches were on the outside of the social norm that they could electrify their base, who opposed the prevailing civic laws and

¹⁵ For more on this, see Robert Wuthnow and John H. Evans, *The Quiet Hand of God*, 5–7, and Dionne Jr., *Souled Out*, 32–34. While Dionne Jr. is more inclined to take the decline rhetoric seriously, both sets of authors argue that liberal religion is less in decline than conservative pundits and theologians would have us believe.

¹⁶ See Thomas E. Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press; Revised edition, 2006). The “rhetoric of crisis” refers to the pessimism that surrounds mainline Protestantism in terms of declining membership, divisiveness over homosexuality, and uninformed, disenchanting laity. Frank argued that mainline Protestants were as influential as they ever were in terms of ministering to the poor, holding positions of leadership, and representing society’s values.

¹⁷ Wuthnow and Evans, *The Quiet Hand of God*, 6–7.

¹⁸ Guth, et al., *The Bully Pulpit*, 36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

increasingly secular society.²⁰ As Ross Douthat has pointed out, conservative congregations have grown steadily since the 1960s at least in part because they were so small to begin with that there was little option but for them to grow.²¹ This has created the perception that conservative religion is on the rise while liberal religion is in retreat, at least among Protestants.

Other authors have examined the UMC's position on homosexuality by reflecting specifically on the theological debate.²² Both the pro-inclusion liberals and the conservatives attempt to use scripture to justify support or prohibition of homosexuality. The most prominent authors on the side of full inclusion for gays and lesbians are sociologist Amanda Udis-Kessler and former minister Jimmy Creech.²³ Pro-LGBTQ authors have argued that scripture is static while an individual's relationship with God is living and evolving. They consider the practical effects of translation on the meaning of the text, and argue that scripture is a tool, not a literal truth. Likewise, the authors in favor of full inclusion point out that the terms "homosexual" and "marriage" have carried different meanings to different cultures at different times.²⁴ Pro-inclusion ministers have tended to focus on the power and benefits of a mutually respectful monogamous relationship, regardless of whether the love in that

²⁰ Frank, *Polity, Practice, and the Mission of the United Methodist Church*, 26-30.

²¹ Douthat, *Bad Religion*, 60–61.

²² See Jeffery S. Siker, ed., *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/J. Knox Press, 1994); Jeffrey S. Siker, *Homosexuality and Religion: An Encyclopedia* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007); Stephen Hunt, ed., *Contemporary Christianity and LGBT Sexualities* (Farham, Surrey, England: Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub, 2009); John S. Munday, *Hate is Sin: Putting Faces on the Debate Over Human Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 2008); and C.K. Robertson, ed., *Religion & Sexuality: Passionate Debates* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

²³ See Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church*; and Keith Hartman, *Congregations in Conflict* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

²⁴ See Charles E. Bennison, "Rethinking Marriage—Again," *Anglican Theological Review* 79, no. 4 (Fall 1997).

relationship is between a man and a woman, or two members of the same sex.

Conservatives on the other hand, have tended to take a position based on tradition, and the transcendent nature of values. Some of the most notable conservative authors of the UMC are Maxie Dunnam, Newton Maloney, and Riley Case who continue to be well respected in conservative circles.²⁵ Believing the Bible to be the literal truth, these authors see any deviation from scripture as dangerous and tend to reject the idea that sexual mores are fluid. Indeed, the conservative interpretation contends that homosexuality is a choice that represents a personal failing. Thus, religious conservatives see LGBTQ inclusion as a perversion of the faith.

Eschewing the theological debate in favor of historical interpretation, it is the contention of this article that not enough attention has been paid to the archival record and history of the UMC in understanding how and why it adopted the language that it did in the *Discipline*. The church's own history of schisms, mergers, and theological diversity is instrumental in the policy debates of the twentieth century, and complicates the notion that the homosexuality debate can be understood by the decline of the northern congregations or liberal religion more generally.

A LIBERAL SOCIAL CREED

To place the homosexuality debate in context, it is necessary to briefly consider some of the liberal social creed of the UMC. With the exception of gay and lesbian inclusion, which several Protestant denominations continue to reject, Methodists have traditionally been a very progressive denomination. The UMC has supported women's rights and minority rights, while also being highly critical of capitalism, gun ownership, and aggressive foreign policy.²⁶ The UMC admonishes against war, having made public statements opposing fighting in Indochina and

²⁵ See Maxie Dunnam and Newton Maloney, ed., *Staying the Course: Supporting the Church's Position on Homosexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003); and Riley Case, *Evangelical and Methodist: A Popular History* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004).

²⁶ Schreiber, *Journal of the 1972 General Conference of The United Methodist Church: Volume II*, 1053–1054, 1062–1063.

later against President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq. The UMC referred to American involvement in Vietnam as a "crime against humanity," and supported non-violent disobedience against the draft as a civic right.²⁷ As the UMC has reaffirmed its liberal positions in each General Conference, the idea that the UMC is becoming more conservative is suspect.

The Methodist Church was one of the first denominations to ordain women, officially recognizing all women's right to preach in 1956. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had licensed Sarah Crosby to preach in 1761, making her one of the earliest female ministers.²⁸ The church made many statements in favor of gender equality for females beginning early in the twentieth century, and remains pro-choice on abortion, believing the issue to be fundamentally a question of a woman's right to control her body. The UMC favored access to contraceptives and denounced any practice that denied women equality in employment or medical care.²⁹ In 1976 the UMC became the first denomination to advocate divorce ceremonies meant to help the healing process for couples who wished to revoke their vows. On issues, such as divorce and abortion, the UMC was able to make policy with respect to the reality of people's needs, while maintaining that they were not advocating support for the practice itself.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid., 1046.

²⁸ The United Methodist Church, *Why Does the United Methodist Church Ordain Women?*, accessed March 27, 2013, <http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=IwL4KnN1LtH&b=4746355&ct=3169209>.

²⁹ Schreiber, *Journal of the 1972 General Conference of The United Methodist Church: Volume II*, 1057–1058. In 1980 the North Central Jurisdiction elected the first female to the rank of Bishop, again representing one of the more progressive decisions in mainline Protestantism. See *The Associated Press*, "Delegates Elect First Woman Bishop," July 18, 1980, PM cycle, accessed April 2, 2013, <http://www.lexisnexis.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/hottopics/lnacademic/>.

³⁰ John Dart, "Methodist Rites Aim at Easing Pain of Divorce," *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 1976, accessed March 28, 2013, <http://proxyau.wrlc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/docview/158062249?accountid=8285>.

The UMC has also been one of the more liberal denominations with respect to race. Its first *Discipline* included an anti-slavery plank that stated slavery to be, “contrary to the golden law of God,” although this was not enforced in the South.³¹ The UMC called for racial and gender equality in civil rights, in the workplace, and in all matters of church administration. Going a step further than simply denouncing racism, the UMC supported reparations for the crime of slavery, Jim Crow, and discriminatory hiring.³² The church also issued strong statements condemning apartheid in South Africa, and colonization in Angola, Mozambique, and other African countries. The Methodists routinely criticized the U.S. government for supporting, “the continued persecution of persons in South Africa,” while also advising parishioners not to support U.S. corporations doing business in South Africa. Methodists called for all U.S. corporations to adopt affirmative action, and for all corporations to make their investment history public. The goal was to inform parishioners how corporations were investing in South Africa, so that only businesses that were non-discriminatory would be supported.³³

Methodists favored better conditions for prisoners in a failed correctional system that was better at punishing than rehabilitating. The UMC supported collective bargaining rights for workers in both private and public occupations, and were long-time champions of, “fair wages for a fair day’s work.” The *Social Principles* denounced economic stratification resulting from capitalist greed. Methodists likewise supported the rights of undocumented workers to organize and fight for the economic and social benefits enjoyed by all citizens, citing education and healthcare as human rights, not merely privileges of citizens.³⁴

While one might reasonably expect a conservative church to denounce unpopular wars or declare support for equality, would it be expected to support divorce and abortion rights, or the rights of undocumented workers? The UMC had conservative influences operating within it in the 1970s just as it always had; yet, its social creed clearly reflects a variety of liberal planks many of which are to the left of the

³¹ W. H. Daniels, *History of Methodism* (New York: Philips & Hunt, 1879), 499.

³² Schreiber, *Journal of the 1972 General Conference of The United Methodist Church: Volume II*, 1058.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1053–1054.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1062– 1063.

current Democratic Party. This demonstrates that at the very least, liberal forces had the capacity to enact legislation reflecting progressive values. So why are LGBTQ rights outliers to the otherwise liberal social creed?

INCORPORATING ANTI-HOMOSEXUAL LANGUAGE INTO THE *BOOK OF DISCIPLINE*

Methodism, like Protestantism in general, saw declining membership rates through the 1960s and beyond; while LGBTQ civil rights movements simultaneously became more ascendant. Before 1972, no Wesleyan body had mentioned homosexuality in its official position, as the subject was usually only discussed in private between a congregation member and his or her minister.³⁵ At the 1972 General Conference however, socially liberal UMC ministers would make the fateful decision to attempt to introduce language that would offer support for LGBTQ civil rights. This attempt at full inclusion was not entirely unexpected by conservative ministers, as it represented the dramatic changes in American culture.³⁶

1950s America maintained a resolutely heterosexual culture that restricted homosexuality in the media, in business, in healthcare, in government protection, and elsewhere. There were in fact more homosexuals purged during the height of McCarthyism than there were communists.³⁷ As historian Elaine Tyler May has demonstrated, government officials believed homosexuality to be as dangerous as communism.³⁸ Historian Robert O. Self has likewise noted that, “As late as 1968, homosexual acts remained a felony in every state except Illinois,

³⁵ Williams and United Methodist Church (U.S.) Committee to Study Homosexuality, *The Church Studies Homosexuality*, 5.

³⁶ See Edward B. Fiske, “Color Some Of the Churches Lavender: Homosexuals,” *The New York Times*, March 28, 1971, sec. The Week in Review, accessed April 22, 2013, <http://proxyau.wrlc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/docview/119357574?accountid=8285>.

³⁷ George Chauncey, *Why Marriage?: The History Shaping Today’s Debate Over Gay Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 5-11, 20.

³⁸ See Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

New York, and New Jersey.”³⁹ The church first thought of homosexuality as a personal failing, a spiritual problem in which a person was giving in to lust. In the late nineteenth century, many Protestant organizations were more concerned with immigrants’ tendency for immorality and drinking, than they were with homosexuality.⁴⁰ Over time homosexuality began to be thought of as a medical problem or sickness, not necessarily the fault of the individual, but a disorder nonetheless that could potentially be cured once it was better understood.⁴¹ Americans associated homosexuality with a disordering of gender roles, unnatural and dangerous to society.

The 1960s and 1970s were periods of tremendous change for gays and lesbians, with the rise of LGBTQ civil rights movements. Particularly in the 1970s, many gays were willing to forego their previous caution and enter the public sphere representing their own identity as full citizens.⁴² In March 1971, members of the LGBTQ community seeking more from their churches, met in New York for the National Conference on Religion and the Homosexual. Not content with mere toleration, many of the gays and lesbians sought to influence theology by taking control of their own congregations. In several major cities homosexuals became the dominant group within the congregation.⁴³

The UMC, like other Protestant denominations, was clearly not immune to the rise of LGBTQ activism. Conservatives feared that the radical climate of the 1970s, which had provided a flurry of new ideologies and influences, would negatively impact the purity of Methodism. One member of the 1972 General Conference wrote to his bishop expressing the widespread concern that, “some may take offense at

³⁹ Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 81.

⁴⁰ Chauncey, *Why Marriage?*, 15.

⁴¹ Gramick and Nugent, “Homosexuality: Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish issues; a fishbone tale,” 11-12.

⁴² John Gallagher and Chris Bull, *Perfect Enemies: The Religious Right, the Gay Movement, and the Politics of the 1990s* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1996), 4.

⁴³ Edward B. Fiske, “Color Some Of the Churches Lavender: Homosexuals,” *The New York Times*, March 28, 1971, sec. The Week in Review, accessed April 22, 2013, <http://proxyau.wrlc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/docview/119357574?accountid=8285>.

what perhaps may be considered the liberal, radical, or inflammatory speeches by some of the delegates.” In response to this fear, the bishop responded with words of encouragement, reminding the parishioner that the General Conference was being held in Atlanta, so at least the conservatives would have a form of home-field advantage.⁴⁴

Other delegates were less fearful of liberal influence, believing conformity of ideology to be unnecessary and ahistorical to Methodism. Dr. Outler, for instance, a member of a committee assigned to recommend doctrinal changes, poignantly remarked on the first day of the conference that “United Methodist ways with doctrine has always been more emotive and practical than dogmatic...” He went on to say, “This, in an age of confusion like ours, has made for a bewildering spectrum of doctrinal diversity... Somewhere in the United Methodist Church there is somebody urging every kind of theology...”⁴⁵ While Dr. Outler was correct in his historical understanding of Methodist diversity, he would nevertheless become entangled in the homosexuality debate, just as his fellow colleagues would. Furthermore, the theological diversity that had been so integral to Methodism’s rapid dissemination in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not going to be possible in a church of the 1970s that sought more structure and universality.

Conservative apprehensions about liberal intentions came to fruition when a predominantly liberal committee’s recommendation to support LGBTQ civil rights was debated on the floor. The conversation started when Mr. Russell Kibler of the South Indiana Annual Conference asked Dr. Robert Moon, the chairman of the committee, to explain what supporting LGBTQ civil rights entailed. Dr. Moon, representing the California-Nevada Annual Conference, responded that homosexuals were being persecuted in society and that it was unjust for homosexuals to lose their jobs upon employers discovering that they were gay or lesbian. In keeping with the church’s position of supporting the oppressed wherever they might be found, Dr. Moon maintained that the UMC ought to support LGBTQ protection by defending civil rights for gays and lesbians. After this clarification, Kibler responded that the UMC should take no part in

⁴⁴ John L. Schreiber, ed., *Journal of the 1972 General Conference of The United Methodist Church: Volume I* (The General Conference of The United Methodist Church, 1972), 243, accessed March 17, 2013, <http://archive.org/stream/journalatlantal01unit#page/n5/mode/2up>.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 281.

supporting homosexuality as it was against Christian teachings. One of Kibler's colleagues suggested keeping the support for civil rights but weakening the statement by replacing the word "homosexual" with "all persons."⁴⁶ Despite objections, most delegates spoke in favor of supporting civil rights with the inclusion of the "all persons" phrase.

When Mr. Hancock of South Georgia took the floor, he shifted the debate to the question of whether or not support of LGBTQ civil rights was supporting homosexuality as "normal."⁴⁷ This question was a rather obvious ploy designed to catch the liberals in a trap whereby they would have to either say that homosexuality was not normal, in which case they alienated the community they sought to defend, or they would have to say homosexual acts were normal, in which case they would likely lose the support of moderates. Referencing the Kinsey Reports on American sexuality, Dr. Moon cleverly retorted that there were many sexual acts pervasive in society that were considered normal, yet would not be supported openly in the church. His committee was not trying to address what was "normal," rather he argued that the language was meant to protect the persecuted. Nevertheless, the debate on sexual norms was brought to the floor, where all manner of assertions was put forward, including the notion that homosexuals were prone to kidnapping and raping children.⁴⁸

The debate should have adjourned for lunch, but by popular support, it continued into extended time. Eventually, Mr. Don J. Hand of Southwest Texas proposed keeping the committee's pro-civil rights language, while adding a final clause that stated the church to be against homosexuality in principle. This proposal was supported by Mr. Hammell Shipp of Southern New Jersey, who emphatically stated homosexuality to be incompatible with Christianity. Mr. Shipp preferred to go even further than Mr. Hand, and proposed that finding the "cause and cure of homosexuality" should be a job of all church agencies.⁴⁹ This recommendation was not ultimately accepted, although support for Mr. Hand's inclusion of the anti-homosexual language was strong enough to carry a majority of the delegation. The final version of the amendment

⁴⁶ Ibid., 458.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 459.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 463.

adopted into the *Social Principles*, and reaffirmed in each quadrennial thereafter, reads:

Homosexuals no less than heterosexuals are persons of sacred worth, who 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. Further we insist that all persons are entitled to have their human and civil rights ensured, although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.⁵⁰

Although homosexuality was nearly recognized by the church in an affirmative light, the inclusion of the final clause ultimately represented a failure to affirm the validity of gay and lesbian sexuality. While the language negatively portrayed homosexuals, it was not used to purge members of the congregation; there were no efforts by church officials to actively seek out the identities of gays or lesbians.

The passage of the anti-homosexual language in the *Social Principles* hurt the LGBTQ community's prospect for full inclusion in the church, but it was not really a victory for conservatives either. By simultaneously supporting LGBTQ civil rights but condemning homosexual acts, the church was attempting to take a moderate position that ended up being attacked from the left, the right, and the center. Professor Paul Ramsey of Princeton University was quoted in the *Chicago Tribune* as suggesting that the adopted language was, "clearly inadequate," and amounted to "pious platitude."⁵¹ Several other news accounts took note of what Dr. Moon referred to as the "confused" position of the church, and most found other positions taken by the denomination, such as support for abortion, to be equally important news.

⁵⁰ Schreiber, *Journal of the 1972 General Conference of The United Methodist Church: Volume II*, 1057.

⁵¹ Richard Philbrick, "Methodists Get New Guidelines," *Chicago Tribune*, April 19, 1972, sec. b9, accessed April 17, 2013, <http://proxyau.wrlc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/docview/170334499?accountid=8285>.

Commentators did not express any major surprise at the condemnation of homosexuality.⁵²

Despite the arguments of those like sociologist Dean Kelley or journalist Dave Shiflett, who have attributed the decline of mainline liberal churches in the North to lack of strict Christian doctrine, in 1972 the northern and western jurisdictions controlled just under half of the votes at the General Conference. The southern and foreign delegation sent 512 of 998 voters, so while delegates that might be reasonably expected to vote conservatively were in the majority, it was a very narrow majority.⁵³ Unfortunately, the voting record of the General Conference was not recorded until 1980, so while the result of the vote is not available, it is highly unlikely that delegates voted along regional lines. Traditionally liberal delegates almost certainly voted with the conservatives, separating the issue of homosexuality from other liberal positions to which they maintained loyalty. This assertion is supported by the fact that the committee, which had accepted the incompatibility language, sent it to the floor for general debate by a vote of fifty-four to one, with two members abstaining.⁵⁴ While much of the committee was not present for this vote, the overwhelming support for the measure suggests that liberals were content to gain support for LGBTQ civil rights, even if that meant explicitly stating homosexuality to be incompatible with Christianity.

⁵² For typical examples of the response, see William R. Mackaye, "United Methodist Church Petitions Run Gamut From Baptism to Sex," *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, April 22, 1972, sec. D29, accessed April 17, 2013,

<http://proxyau.wrlc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/docview/148323169?accountid=8285>; and *Los Angeles Times*, "The Nation: Methodist Parley Condemns Homosexuality," April 27, 1972, sec. c2, accessed April 18, 2013,

<http://proxyau.wrlc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/docview/156877803?accountid=8285>.

⁵³ In 1972, the two southern jurisdictions sent only six more delegates to the General Conference than the two northern jurisdictions. For a full list of all of the delegates, see John L. Schreiber, ed., *Journal of the 1972 General Conference of The United Methodist Church: Volume I*, 28–108.

⁵⁴ Schreiber, *Journal of the 1972 General Conference of The United Methodist Church: Volume II*, 1055.

Conservatives found support for civil rights acceptable, so long as the UMC would not consider homosexual acts to be Christian.

At the next General Conference in 1976, homosexuality was again a contentious topic of debate. The fundamental questions were largely the same as in 1972, but the tactics and rhetoric changed noticeably. In 1972, the Methodists were introducing language on the subject for the first time and had the opportunity to craft any statement they wanted without the burden of a precedent to fight. In 1976, there was an existing statement supported by a majority of the denomination. The only question was whether the condemnation would soften or go further.

The liberals appealed to the imperfectness of all people, and would suggest that even if homosexuality was in fact wrong, that was more reason to welcome the LGBTQ community to congregations where they might find salvation. Some of the conservatives wanted to rollback the language supporting gay and lesbian civil rights, though the majority was content to maintain the existing language while strengthening the condemnation of homosexuality via fiscal measures designed to repress pro-LGBTQ positions. Once again, the northern and southern delegations were in near parity as the South had a mere twelve delegate advantage. Furthermore, the North and West combined for 48 percent of the General Conference delegation, down only 1 percent from 1972.⁵⁵

Mr. Keith Spare, representing LGBTQ groups, led the charge in favor of revoking the incompatibility language. He began with an impassioned statement on the nature of gay and lesbian suffering. He reminded his colleagues that, “We come before this body breaking a history of silence and invisibility which has surrounded this issue. This silence has been a perpetuation of untold suffering not only for our gay brothers and sisters and their families, but the entire Christian community.”⁵⁶ Shortly thereafter, Mr. Leonard Slutz of West Ohio sought to amend the *Social Principles* by adding a sentence that stated that the

⁵⁵ The foreign delegates represented only 8 percent of the delegation, unchanged from 1972. For a full list of delegates see John L. Schreiber, ed., *Journal of the 1976 General Conference of the United Methodist Church: Volume I*, 27–89, accessed on April 12, 2013, <http://archive.org/stream/journalportland01unit#page/n5/mode/2up>.

⁵⁶ Schreiber, *Journal of the 1976 General Conference of the United Methodist Church: Volume I*, 436.

UMC welcomed, “all persons regardless of sexual orientation.”⁵⁷ While some liberals did wish to overturn the incompatibility statement, the thrust of their effort sought not to repeal it, but rather to assuage its impact. K. June Goldman, a moderate from Iowa, responded to the more liberal members by suggesting that recognition of gays and lesbians as peoples of “sacred worth” was enough of an endorsement of the LGBTQ community.⁵⁸ Ultimately, the delegation rejected the proposal to welcome all parishioners regardless of sexual orientation.⁵⁹ In 1988 the UMC adopted this language, but only after several more prohibitions of homosexual behavior were passed.

Once again, the General Conference did not record the vote, making it unclear exactly how popular the decision was. However, given the fact that the delegates went on to pass a measure preventing openly homosexual church members from becoming counselors or social workers, which was endorsed by a unanimous committee vote of sixty-two to zero, it may be reasonably surmised that a majority of both liberal and conservative delegates favored withholding support for the LGBTQ community.⁶⁰ Proscriptions against spending funds in support of the LGBTQ community were also passed in 1976, making the 1972 language fiscally binding.⁶¹

In 1976, the UMC also debated launching a denomination-wide study of human sexuality, meant to inform the General Conference of opinions throughout the denomination and bring the newest scholarship to

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Goldman went on to reference some five thousand petitions sent to the General Conference, the majority of which, supported maintaining the incompatibility language. Schreiber, *Journal of the 1976 General Conference of the United Methodist Church: Volume I*, 437.

⁵⁹ *Facts on File World News Digest*, “Methodists Oppose Homosexuality,” December 18, 1976, accessed March 12, 2013, <http://www.lexisnexis.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/hottopics/lnacademic/>.

⁶⁰ John L. Schreiber, ed., *Journal of the 1976 General Conference of the United Methodist Church: Volume II* (The General Conference of the United Methodist Church, 1976), 1413, accessed April 12, 2013, <http://www.archive.org/details/journalportland02unit>.

⁶¹ Williams and the Committee to Study Homosexuality, *The Church Studies Homosexuality*, 11; and Schreiber, *Journal of the 1976 General Conference of the United Methodist Church: Volume II*, 1752.

bear on the subject. Over 1,400 petitions against a study of sexuality flooded into the General Conference from around the United States in response. Mr. Freeman, who presented a report in favor of the study, suggested that most of the sentiment against the study was based on false assumptions, and urged his colleagues to act by stating that, “We have a responsibility of leadership ... We cannot simply refuse to act because the question is explosive.”⁶² Opposition to the study was great however, and it came from both liberals and conservatives. A conservative minister offered the legitimate criticism that there was no clear rubric with which to measure the final results because it was unclear what standards the study would employ. This minister worried that the study would concentrate more on normative behavior and opinions in places like San Francisco while under-sampling Middle America.⁶³ A liberal minister worried less about the study being contaminated by bias and instead argued against it as an unnecessary waste of church dollars. She pointed out that, “...since we met the last time [1972], there have been more than 4,000 books published representing studies in individual and conference studies in sexuality.” She went on to reflect that it was naïve to believe that a denominational study might offer any new insight that had not yet been uncovered by secular society.⁶⁴ The coalition of liberal and conservative forces easily defeated the proposal to study sexuality. Not until 1991 would the General Conference sanction such a project.

The balance of power between the North and the South remained stable through the 1984 and 1988 General Conferences. In each conference the combined southern and foreign delegation controlled approximately 55 percent of the General Conference vote share. Interestingly, although the UMC would continue to move to the right on the homosexuality question by passing additional legislation against gays and lesbians, support for such measures declined. This trend continued into the 1990s and 2000s, supporting the assertion that demographic shifts

⁶² Schreiber, *Journal of the 1976 General Conference of the United Methodist Church: Volume I*, 501.

⁶³ Schreiber, *Journal of the 1976 General Conference of the United Methodist Church: Volume I*, 502.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 504.

are not responsible for the UMC's conservative stance on homosexuality.⁶⁵

In the 1980 General Conference, delegates voted slightly more than three-to-one to maintain the anti-homosexual language, and while the vote on the prohibition of funding to any pro-gay group was not recorded, it did ultimately pass.⁶⁶ Delegates also favored keeping language to protect LGBTQ civil rights, and called upon the U.S. Congress to enact federal legislation to the same effect. The delegates likewise called for executive orders banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in federal agencies and the military.⁶⁷ Negative language stating a homosexual relationship to not be marriage was replaced with positive language stating a marriage to be between a man and a woman.⁶⁸ This minor semantic victory did nothing to promote gay and lesbian rights, but it did at least rephrase the gay marriage ban to avoid using negative language.

The UMC delegates did vote down a proposal to ban openly homosexual clergy, ensuring that ordination standards would continue to be determined by local Annual Conferences. Conservatives had attempted to ban openly gay ministers after the Southern New York Annual Conference retained Reverend Paul Abels, an openly gay minister of a New York City congregation.⁶⁹ By maintaining that homosexuality was incompatible with Christianity, but also leaving the door open to gay and

⁶⁵ For a full list of all recorded votes, See Amanda Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church*, 194.

⁶⁶ Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church*, 194. See also John L. Schreiber, ed., *Journal of the 1980 General Conference of the United Methodist Church: Volume II* (The General Conference of the United Methodist Church, 1980), 776, accessed April 2, 2013, <http://www.archive.org/cletails/journalindiana02unit>.

⁶⁷ Schreiber, *Journal of the 1980 General Conference of the United Methodist Church: Volume II*, 801–802.

⁶⁸ George W. Cornell, "Methodist Church Maintains Firm Stand Against Homosexuals," *The Associated Press*, April 19, 1980, accessed March 12, 2013, <http://www.lexisnexis.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/hottopics/lnacademic/>.

⁶⁹ *The Globe and Mail*, "Church Won't Ban Ordination of Gays," April 24, 1980, sec. T.5, accessed April 28, 2013, <http://proxyau.wrlc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/docview/386968101?accountid=8285>.

lesbian ministers, one minister reflected that, “the church prefers ambiguity to clarity.”⁷⁰

Even as the church maintained the proscriptions of the 1970s, it also began to address the problem of homophobia. Approved by a wide margin, a 1980 church committee prepared a document on human sexuality designed to educate local congregations. A lengthy section of the document denounced homophobia as a waste of talent and intellect and reflected upon the pain and suffering that such fear and divisiveness causes.⁷¹ Subsequent to the report, one of the social resolutions produced by the 1980 conference condemned homophobia as bigotry against people of sacred worth, and a waste of intellect and energy.⁷² Needless to say, homosexuals were confused by the church’s positions. Many gays and lesbians found it contradictory to label homosexuality incompatible with Christian teaching, while also allowing ministers to be gay or lesbian and condemning homophobia. How could a person have civil rights and sacred worth, but also be incompatible with their God?

In 1984 the votes toward the incompatibility language and the ban on pro-gay funding were not recorded, but by a nearly six-to-four margin the General Conference would ban ministers from performing homosexual acts. The UMC had not favored banning homosexual acts in 1980 because the institution does not normally ban specific acts of ministers, such as smoking or drinking, lest the prohibitions be endless. Yet in 1984 conservative forces were successfully able to introduce, “fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness,” into the *Discipline* by a vote of 568 to 404.⁷³ Since homosexuals were not able to marry, this effectively meant

⁷⁰ Russell Chandler, “Methodists Refuse to Bar Ordination of Gays but Renew Anti-Homosexual Stand,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 1980, accessed February 26, 2013, <http://proxyau.wrlc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/docview/162793249?accountid=8285>.

⁷¹ Schreiber, *Journal of the 1980 General Conference of the United Methodist Church: Volume II*, 796–801.

⁷² See United Methodist Church, *The Book of Resolutions* (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1980).

⁷³ Russell Chandler, “Methodists Act to Shut Homosexual Loophole After Adverse Ruling,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 1984, accessed April 3, 2013, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/153850902?accountid=8285>.

that the homosexual ministers would have to remain celibate if they wished to serve as ministers. In effect, this forced many aspiring LGBTQ ministers to abandon ordination. The vote revoked long-standing policy that allowed local regions to determine the standards of ordination. The decision reflected the twentieth-century, post-unification trend of the UMC towards a more centralized governing structure.

The one notable exception to the centralization of doctrine relates to Methodists living outside of the United States. Historically, foreigners were represented at the General Conference but were not allowed to vote. As a consolation, the UMC allowed foreigners the right to ignore those policies adopted by Americans that were repugnant to their own culture and customs. So while the foreign delegation could not always vote on social policy, it also had tremendous leeway not to follow the policy that was actually adopted. Even after gaining voting rights, foreign delegations are still not obligated to enforce the General Conference's policies. This is significant because the foreign delegation votes very conservatively on issues of social policy that affect American parishioners, while also being free to nullify any liberal positions that come out of the mother church. This has led many of the more liberal pastors of the 1990s and 2000s to suggest amending the *Discipline* to allow American jurisdictions to likewise cater the General Conference's policies to local desires.⁷⁴

METHODISTS COMMISSION A STUDY OF HOMOSEXUALITY

By the end of the 1980s the UMC had moved from an essentially moderate, albeit ambiguous, position, to openly banning gays from marriage and ministry. Although there were no new major policy decisions made after 1984, in 1988 the General Conference did agree to finally commission a denomination-wide survey. It was decided that a committee, chaired by Rev. Nancy Yamasaki and meant to study homosexuality, would perform a four-year assessment of church policy and present its findings to the 1992 conference.⁷⁵ The committee interviewed many congregants and ministers, receiving a wide variety of

See also Williams and the Committee to Study Homosexuality, *The Church Studies Homosexuality*, 12.

⁷⁴ Robbins, *A World Parish?*, 23.

⁷⁵ Williams and the Committee to Study Homosexuality, *The Church Studies Homosexuality*, 5.

feedback and experiences while also considering theological questions from a scholarly perspective.

Despite the diversity of opinions surrounding biblical interpretations, the committee concluded that the Bible does not speak to sexual orientation at all; it only speaks to sexual actions. There are only seven passages that illustrate homosexual actions, and they are each problematic because of their underlying cultural assumptions. The belief in the inferiority of women was found to be underlying most of the condemnations against homosexuality. Because men were supposed to be assertive and dominant in sexuality, and women were assumed to be passive and inferior by design, for two men to engage each other physically would require one to “reduce” himself to that of a woman. Likewise, when two women engage in lesbian behavior, one must overstep her position as an inferior. Once the Biblical assumption of the natural inferiority of women is abandoned, the text is revealed to have little impact on condemning homosexuality.⁷⁶ Furthermore, the Biblical context of the term “homosexual” was quite different from the modern meaning of the word. Many of the Biblical condemnations of homosexuality are more akin to condemnations of pedophilia, and have been misinterpreted by readers who do not recognize the effects of poor translations.⁷⁷

The committee was also heavily influenced by the inability of science to neatly define what homosexuality is, when it starts, or what kinds of factors might cause it. There was general agreement that sexual identity begins at a young age, and that it is difficult, if not impossible, to change one’s orientation. The committee found that homosexual “therapy” designed to change a person’s orientation was often dangerous and destructive. This finding was enough to sway some committee members towards inclusion as they did not wish to judge people for something that was not under their control.⁷⁸

In the interviews I collected of parishioners and ministers, there were a variety of responses to gay and lesbian inclusion in the church. One mother, who had a son dying of AIDS, wondered if, “anyone would come to his funeral.” A father of a gay youth described the hostility his son faced at an Easter Sunday service when comments were made asking, “Is this a fag church?” Others described the confusion they faced in their lives

⁷⁶Ibid., 17.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

over the mixed messages they received from religion and society. A lesbian woman commented, “Imagine my confusion when I would go to church on Sunday and be told that I was a sinner, then go to my therapist who encouraged me to accept and love myself.” A gay couple remarked of their surprise to not only be accepted by their congregation, but to be welcomed in with open arms and encouragement. Others spoke of their confusion with flirtations with homosexual behavior and the happiness that came to them later through heterosexual relationships.⁷⁹

The committee ultimately found that the divisiveness surrounding the homosexuality debate was entirely out of proportion, unwarranted, and unjustified. They found monogamy to exist among both heterosexual and homosexual couples, no difference between heterosexual and homosexual effectiveness in parenting, and more instances of sexual violence between men and women than between gay or lesbian couples. The committee also determined that multiple partners, regardless of sexual orientation, exacerbated the spread of sexual diseases such as AIDS.⁸⁰ It is striking that the committee reached these conclusions, as they reflect a purely liberal view of theology, and essentially repudiate nearly all the conservative justifications for attacking gays and lesbians.

Among the recommendations approved by both liberals and conservatives, the committee recommended that homosexuals should have the same opportunity for redemption as heterosexuals. The church could not teach that “sexual orientation, either heterosexual or homosexual, is deliberately chosen.” They also recommended that a paragraph be added to the *Discipline* stating that the church was not of one mind on sexuality. That paragraph reads:

We acknowledge with humility that the church has been unable to arrive at a common mind on the compatibility of homosexual practice with Christian faith. Many consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. Others believe it acceptable when practiced in a context of human covenantal faithfulness. (INSERTION) The Church seeks further understanding through continued prayer, study, and pastoral experience. In doing so, the church continues to affirm that God’s grace is bestowed on all, and

⁷⁹ Ibid., 35. Many other powerful testimonies are included.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 27-30.

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that the members of Christ's body are called to be in ministry for and with one another, and the world.

A majority of the committee members preferred inserting the following passage into the paragraph at the point marked INSERTION:

The present state of knowledge and insight in the biblical, theological, ethical, biological, psychological, and sociological fields do not provide a satisfactory basis upon which the church can responsibly maintain the condemnation of all homosexual practice.

A minority of the panel preferred replacing the marked point of INSERTION with:

The present state of knowledge and insight in the biblical, theological, ethical, biological, psychological, and sociological fields does not provide a satisfactory basis upon which the church can responsibly alter its previously held position that we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.

Thus, while the vast majority consented to disagree, a smaller majority wanted to repeal the incompatibility language because there was not enough evidence to support the notion of homosexuality as morally wrong, and a minority wanted to maintain the incompatibility language because there was not enough information to say homosexuality was not wrong!⁸¹

On December 4, 1991, the General Council on Ministries voted to receive the committee's report as legitimate and valid, but would not approve any of its findings or recommendations, leading to no significant changes in church law. Regardless of how much division there was, the Methodists were simply unwilling to allow a policy issue to divide them in matters of governance. Battles over church policy would continue to be fought in the media, on the debate floor, in the Judicial Council, and in the court of public opinion, but the Methodists did not officially agree to disagree.

⁸¹ Ibid., 36.

CONCLUSION

From 1972 through 1984, the UMC took increasingly conservative positions on the inclusion of gay and lesbian parishioners. What started with a short clause on the incompatibility of homosexuality with Christianity, added only after intense debate, grew into a condemnation of gay marriage, and a ban on openly gay and lesbian ministers. These decisions were not the product of demographic shifts in church membership as the decisions garnered support in both the North and the South. For liberals, the early decisions reflected a positive contribution, in that they officially recognized the civil rights of the LGBTQ community, while conservatives supported the incompatibility language. Later decisions to ban homosexual ministers and marriage saw much less support in general, though it was the logical outcome of the conservative position.

While the northern congregations lost members at a much faster rate than the southern congregations, there was parity between traditionally liberal and conservative congregations through the 1970s and 1980s when the proscriptions against homosexuals were passed. Furthermore, in the 1990s and 2000s, when the decline of northern and western congregations accelerated, the recorded votes of the General Conference on homosexuality actually became closer. In 1980 three-quarters of General Conference delegates voted to retain the UMC's incompatibility language, but by 1996 support fell to only 60 percent.⁸² Given the fact that the United Methodist Church would retain all its other socially and economically liberal positions, one must conclude that the homosexuality debate represents an outlier to the church's *Social Principles*.

By removing the theological diversity that once marked Methodism, the UMC created a situation where every floor debate became integral. Since local congregations were not free to determine their own policy, losing a vote in the General Conference was akin to losing theological control. This has resulted in a very divisive and polarized public fight. However, the Methodists of the 1970s and 1980s, only a few decades removed from nearly a century of separation following the Civil War, preferred unity with its faults to theological diversity and possible

⁸² Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church*, 194.

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schism. As foreign congregations now comprise almost 40 percent of the entire Methodist church, it is unclear what direction future Methodists will travel.