

A time to split? Covenant and schism in the UMC

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [April 16, 2014](#) issue



Protesters for greater inclusivity in the United Methodist Church at the 2012 General Conference. Mike DuBose / United Methodist News Service.

When people choose to break the covenant that holds us together, there has to be some accountability,” said Rob Renfro, a United Methodist pastor. He was commenting on the decision by a United Methodist court to strip pastor Frank Schaefer of his clergy credentials because he had conducted a same-sex wedding

ceremony for his son and refused to promise to refrain from such actions in the future.

Renfroe, who heads a conservative movement in the United Methodist Church known as Good News, was alluding to specific language in the UMC's governing document, the Book of Discipline, which calls clergy into a "covenant of mutual care and accountability." This document has recently been amended to state that clergy who perform same-sex weddings are guilty of a "chargeable offense."

A growing number of UMC clergy are performing such ceremonies in open defiance of the Book of Discipline, prompting a series of church trials which has bitterly divided the church. After Schaefer's trial in December, John Lomperis, United Methodist director for the Institute on Religion and Democracy, praised the ruling for upholding "biblical standards" and added that Schaefer "was not the first United Methodist minister to be defrocked for crossing these lines and will not be the last."

But it's not at all clear how much defrocking will take place. The case against Thomas Ogletree, the former Yale Divinity School dean who presided over the same-sex wedding of his son, was dropped by a UMC court in New York, and the bishop in New York, Martin McLee, declared that no trials will be conducted in the future. Instead of holding trials, McLee said, the New York Annual Conference will offer clergy "a process of theological, spiritual, and ecclesiastical conversation."

Other UMC bishops have themselves performed ceremonies for same-sex couples or have openly disagreed with the rules in the Book of Discipline. In the wake of Schaefer's conviction, Bishop Minerva Carcaño offered Schaefer an opportunity to work in her California-Pacific Annual Conference. In the Pacific Northwest, two complaints against clergy were resolved by suspending the clergy for 24 hours without pay—a sign that Bishop Grant Hagiya has no interest in prosecution.

Meanwhile, conservatives like Renfroe have been urging the denomination to hold clergy more accountable. The failure to prosecute clergy who violate the Book of Discipline is "confusing to the world and discouraging to the majority of our members," said Renfroe. Bishop Scott Jones of the Great Plains Annual Conference has declared that if 100 clergy in his conference perform same-sex weddings, "then there will be 100 suspensions from ministry . . . followed by 100 trials."

The conflict in the United Methodist Church over what it means to break or to keep covenant in relation to same-sex weddings goes back to actions by the church's

General Conference in 1972. The General Conference, which serves as the church's top legislative body, was considering a statement on social principles that included a section on the goodness of human sexuality. In the waning hours of the conference, an amendment was offered from the floor to declare the practice of homosexuality "incompatible with Christian teaching." The wording was inserted in a paragraph that affirms that all people are of "sacred worth" and urges the friends and families of gay and lesbian people not to "reject or condemn them."

A similar legislative move transpired in 1984. This time, the General Conference was considering qualifications for ordained ministry. A proposal from the floor led to the adoption of this statement: "The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed, practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in the United Methodist Church."

These two changes ushered in an era of "don't ask, don't tell" for United Methodist clergy. Many gay and lesbian clergy were, in fact, ordained over the next 20 years. As long as they were not vocal about their sexual orientation and no problems emerged in congregations, many bishops and district superintendents chose to ignore the language in the Book of Discipline. According to Scott Campbell, a pastor in Cambridge, Massachusetts, "The preferred style of bishops and district superintendents was: if you don't embarrass me publicly, I won't embarrass you."

Activism on the issue did not cease. Some clergy announced their sexual orientation or performed same-sex ceremonies, and some were dismissed from ministry. In 1996, 1,300 United Methodist clergy signed a letter urging the General Conference to grant full acceptance to gays and lesbians. "We believe it is time to break the silence and state where we are on this issue that is hurting and silencing countless faithful Christians. We will continue our responsibility to order and discipline of the church but urge our United Methodist churches to open the doors in gracious hospitality to all our brothers and sisters in the faith."

Though activists spoke out, the prospects for changing the wording of the Book of Discipline were growing more remote. An unusual feature of the United Methodist Church compared to other mainline churches in the United States is that the UMC includes jurisdictions all over the world. The UMC's central conferences are made up of churches in Africa, Europe, and the Philippines. These churches—some of the fastest growing in the denomination—account for some 5 million of the UMC's total

membership of 12.5 million. They also tend to be strong supporters of the rules prohibiting gay pastors and same-sex ceremonies. These churches hold the balance of power in the debate on homosexuality.

The next decisive move came in 2004, when the General Conference voted by the narrow margin of ten votes (455 to 445) to add a new provision to the Book of Discipline. The list of chargeable offenses against clergy was expanded to include being a “self-avowed practicing homosexual” and performing same-sex weddings.

This action opened a new arena for engagement: the judicial system of the United Methodist Church. In previous trials, clergy had been presented only with vague charges regarding their alleged “disobedience to the order and discipline of the church.” The specificity of the new rules set the stage for a new round of trials. The new clarity also galvanized opposition, because it made sexual orientation and the performance of a same-sex ceremony as serious an offense as embezzlement and sexual harassment.

Making the issue a chargeable offense “really upped the ante,” noted Tom Frank, a historian of United Methodism who teaches at Wake Forest University. “Instead of charging someone with disobedience to the order and discipline of the church, which would allow for serious conversation about a pastor’s motives, there is no wiggle room anymore.”

Though supporters of gay couples have met defeat at the General Conference, the network of clergy who find the language in the Book of Discipline unacceptable has grown in number and commitment. Matt Berryman, executive director of the Reconciling Ministries Network, said, “We’ve seen the movement grow from strength to strength. We’ve seen an increased commitment to the struggle, and people galvanized in intensity and urgency and support.”

Some activists who want to change the Book of Discipline pursue a strategy of “biblical obedience”: they act as if the laws they regard as unjust do not exist. They liken this effort to that of protesters in the civil rights movement who disobeyed segregation laws they regarded as unjust. “Without overstressing the analogy, it is still important to remember the pre-civil rights era South,” said Dorothee Benz of MIND (Methodists in New Directions). “If you had said to a black person, ‘You don’t like the law? Go vote for change,’ everyone knows in hindsight that there was no legislative route to change.”

Many clergy are committing to performing same-sex unions publicly and to talking about it. Benz believes that this strategy is powerful. “The beauty of the movement that we’ve been able to spark now in the United Methodist Church is that we are living ‘as if.’ We are providing the ministry that is needed and challenging the system in the only way that the system can be challenged at this moment.”

Those who support the language of the Book of Discipline see clergy trials as an important way of enforcing church discipline. Said Tom Lambrecht of Good News, “If we remove trials, there is no other method of holding people accountable. People can do whatever they want to do, which is the recipe for anarchy within the church.”

Tom Frank, who testified at the trial of Frank Schaefer, found the adversarial courtroom procedure unsettling. “You have a ‘prosecution table’ and a ‘defense table.’ You have a ‘judge’ sitting at an elevated table. You have an elevated ‘witness’ stand and a ‘jury’ box.” Frank noted that the counsel for the church was kept separate from the counsel for the defense. “This of course completely removes any possibility for further conversation. It becomes a forum for making speeches.” Frank thought to himself: “This is insane! This is a church! What are we doing?”

In Frank’s view, such trials represent not only a failure in public relations but a failure to be church, a failure to follow through on the idea of a clergy covenant.

According to the Book of Discipline, clergy are part of a “covenant of mutual care and accountability with all those who share this ordination.” Frank noted that because of the Methodist appointment system—the church assigns ministers to their positions—this covenant can be more primary for pastors than their bonds with a congregation. Clergy commit to meeting together and supporting one another.

On many sides of the divide over homosexuality, people decry the breaking of the covenant. For Renfro, Lambrecht, and others, the covenant is broken whenever a pastor chooses to perform a same-sex wedding. But for a pastor such as Amy DeLong—who was put on trial by the church in 2011 for being a partnered lesbian and for officiating at the union of a lesbian couple—the notion of a covenant is diluted beyond recognition when it is invoked to ask her to be ashamed of who she is and to deprive others of pastoral care. She decries a clergy covenant that “requires participation in a conspiracy of silence, transforming even our friends into mute bystanders to ecclesiastical bullying.”

The word *covenant* hints at what many Methodists value highly in United Methodism: its connectionalism. Connectionalism is meant to be a corrective to a culture of individualism and provide support in ministry. Within United Methodism, pastors are ordained into a regional body called the annual conference, and they maintain that affiliation sometimes even when they move far beyond its boundaries. Within the annual conference, they submit to appointments made by a bishop, who assigns them to churches as itinerants. Beyond the annual conference, Methodists are connected regionally, nationally, and globally.

Frank believes that the current conflict is rooted in a failure of the covenant, a failure that goes far beyond the breaking of legislative rules. “We have merged many annual conferences. The conferences are so big that the clergy covenant is not viable. There is no way for several hundred people to have meaningful conversations. Many clergy do not know each other. They may know each other’s names, but they have never had a meaningful conversation, not even over a cup of coffee. This leads to a kind of individualism, a professional isolation, where everyone works on their own. It is inimical to the model of covenant that has been the essence of the connectional system.”

Frank’s point is illustrated by the way complaints have been lodged against clergy. A complaint was filed against Ogletree after someone in his annual conference read an article about him in the *New York Times*. Sara Thompson Tweedy, a married lesbian, received the complaint made against her in the form of a collection of newspaper articles, presented to show that she was a “self-avowed, practicing homosexual”—a formulation she rejects.

Because the clergy covenant is not founded on real relationships, said Frank, there is a “vacant territory” for legalists who claim that a covenant means following the rules. “That is a very limited view of what a covenant is. Maybe there are marriages like that, but I wouldn’t want to be in one, would you?”

Many in United Methodism worry that those who perform same-sex ceremonies are acting as individuals, not as part of the connectionalism vital to United Methodism. One person I interviewed said, off the record, “I don’t get it. How can you claim to be part of the church and then say, ‘I am going my own way, with or without you’?”

But Robin Hynicka challenges the idea that performing a same-sex wedding—which he did in November 2013 at Arch Street United Methodist Church in Philadelphia

along with more than 36 other UMC clergy—was an act of individualism. His decision, he says, was based on a process of discernment undertaken with both his congregation and his colleagues. His decision to perform a same-sex wedding was not, in his view, an act of disobedience but an act through the Holy Spirit working through a deep affiliation with his congregation and its needs.

Jeremy Smith, a pastor who blogs at hackingchristianity.net, agrees that accusations of individualism are misplaced when directed at activist clergy. He believes that these clergy are not acting as outliers and individuals but as a “sustained community that consistently comes to the conclusion that this is discriminatory. And they come to this conclusion across differences of age, gender, and region. It doesn’t even matter that they agree on theology. I think you have more authority to speak up because you are not an isolated individual—you are part of a community.”

Those who support the rules in the Book of Discipline are pushing for more legislative steps to enforce them, perhaps by instituting mandatory penalties. Another effort, said Lambrecht of Good News, focuses on “creative solutions that would allow people to leave the church and find a body of Christians that they would be more amenable to be a part of.” Lambrecht would like to make it easier for pastors who disagree with the language of the Book of Discipline to leave the church.

The divide over homosexuality in the UMC may have grown too wide to bridge. Jack Jackson, professor of mission at Claremont School of Theology, believes that it may be time for the church to cut its losses and separate. “Every four years we have this vitriolic conversation that has only gotten worse and worse. . . . I think we are stuck. How can we get unstuck? How long can the church in progressive areas hang on and continue to decline? Or would it be better to say, we are brothers and sisters in this Methodist movement, but really we can’t live together anymore? Let’s bless each other in our different ministries and move on.”

Options for schism are on the table, and both sides make arguments for it. But what exactly would a schism look like? When the United Methodists split over slavery in 1844, it was along regional lines. But now conservative and progressive churches can be found in every state. United Methodists have prided themselves on their diversity. Even though positions on homosexuality within the church can to some degree be regionally mapped, there is little chance that a split could take place along regional lines. Instead, experts say, the church is likely to end up with two

geographically overlapping national organizations.

But annual conferences own the property on which each individual church rests. When Lambrecht proposes that individual clergy leave the UMC for other churches, he does not envision them taking property and congregations with them. To get to the point where two national churches could be formed, the church as a whole would have to allow individual churches to choose which newly formed organization they will join. There are no signs that this will happen without a bitter battle. And, as some point out, not every congregation or every United Methodist can be so neatly divided. The ax would fall hardest on congregations that have worked to bridge divides and maintain diversity in their pews.

Several people I spoke to suggested that one way to move forward might be to give the UMC jurisdictions in the United States a measure of autonomy similar to that given to a central conference. Churches in central conferences are allowed to make culturally specific rules that fit their particular situation. For example, the requirements for clergy education do not apply in some African countries.

While there is a lot of talk about greater autonomy, Jackson is not sure anyone actually wants it. Progressives do not want to be in a church in which some parts are allowed to discriminate against gays and lesbians, and conservatives don't want to be part of a church in which gays and lesbians can be clergy, even if they serve in another region. If conservatives were eventually to lose the vote on changing the language of the Book of Discipline, some would simply leave. "Some of them leave the next Sunday and some of them leave in the next four years, by the next General Conference. I am not sure there are that many people who want to find a middle ground," Jackson said.

There are many people, however, who believe that there is still room for lower-level, lower-stakes conversations. They believe that the clergy trials have pointed out the failure to have meaningful dialogue and revealed the collapse of the clergy covenant, and they want to invest in a covenant revival.

Bishop Sally Dyck of the Northern Illinois Annual Conference points to Acts 15 as one possible starting place for a new conversation—one that does not try to change people's minds about homosexuality. "At the end of Acts 15, no one in Jerusalem had changed their minds about how they felt about gentiles, but they had somehow been convinced by the witness of Paul that there needed to be space [for them].

They found some way to be together. Are there conditions that would help us live together?"

Activists on both sides are not necessarily eager for such an effort, which may serve only to postpone the day of reckoning.

An earlier version of this article incorrectly referred to central conferences as singular rather than plural.