

At UM-Forward gathering, United Methodists consider a new “Liberation Methodist Church”

by [Sam Hodges](#) in the [April 8, 2020](#) issue



Alka Lyall, pastor at Broadway United Methodist Church in Chicago, speaks at the opening worship service of a gathering that discussed the possibility of a new, inclusive Methodist denomination. (UM News/Sam Hodges)

Some came wanting a new denomination. Others said they prefer, for now, to keep working within the United Methodist Church.

But all who attended a UM-Forward event held March 6–8 expressed commitment to gospel-based activism on various fronts, namely LGBTQ inclusion, but also

reparations, workers' rights, and climate change.

The Dallas gathering, called Trailblazing the Liberation Methodist Church, was held at Preston Hollow United Methodist Church, and the agenda included work toward forming a new denomination, as well as strategizing for the 2020 General Conference.

The General Conference, set for May 5–15 in Minneapolis, will consider various plans for structural change. Among them is the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation, which would allow traditionalist churches and conferences to leave with their properties and form a separate denomination, using \$25 million in United Methodist funds.

The protocol was arrived at by a 16-member negotiating team, including traditionalists, centrists, and progressives. At the table was Jan Lawrence, executive director of the Reconciling Ministries Network, which has long advocated for full inclusion of LGBTQ people in the UMC.

But UM-Forward was not part of the discussion on the protocol, and leaders noted that ethnic ministry representatives also weren't included. An early mention of the protocol at the Dallas meeting brought scattered boos.

"Sixteen people making a decision for the whole United Methodist Church? I don't think it's representative, especially of ethnic churches," said Sandra Bonnette-Kim, pastor of Grace United Methodist Church in Lynn, Massachusetts, in an interview between sessions on March 8.

For the 2020 General Conference, UM-Forward has introduced its own New Expressions Worldwide plan which calls for dissolving the UMC and creating four new denominations from traditionalist, moderate, progressive, and liberationist perspectives.

Longtime advocates for LGBTQ full inclusion such as Sue Laurie and David Braden said it's time for a liberationist Methodist group.

"If the [United Methodist] church doesn't want to change, I need a place that's going to affirm me in my full humanity, and I want to make sure other LGBTQ folks know that God loves them for who they are," said Braden, a layperson in the Northern Illinois Conference.

Roughly half of those at the Dallas gathering, many of them laity, met together on March 7 for lengthy sessions about creating a denomination with the placeholder name Liberation Methodist Church.

They were guided by an eight-page draft document titled “Roadmap to the Autonomous Liberation Methodist Church.” It describes the denomination as having term limits for bishops, if it has bishops at all.

Organizers stressed that most specifics for the proposed new group will continue to be worked out and refined, with an update expected to be shared by Easter and articles of incorporation likely filed before the General Conference in May.

Others at the Dallas gathering met together under the working title United Methodist Liberation Collective, to strategize for the General Conference and consider how they can advance a liberationist agenda from within.

Alka Lyall, pastor of Broadway United Methodist Church in Chicago and chair of the Northern Illinois delegation to the 2020 General Conference, joined in what organizers called this “semi-autonomous” track of the meeting.

“I continue to work on the legislative end and see if we can liberate the [United] Methodist Church,” she said. “I am holding onto that possibility. I believe in the God of hope.”

For Lyall, having two tracks at the Dallas gathering was not a problem.

“We don’t have to be separate to do a new thing,” she said. “We can do it together.”

Some attending the conference came mostly to collect information on options as their local church considers its future. Darryl Stephens, a professor at Lancaster Theological Seminary, planned to report back to his church, Grandview United Methodist in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The congregation there recently voted to begin the process of disaffiliation, though a second vote is planned for after the General Conference.

Stephens said he has “healthy skepticism” about the viability of a new liberationist Methodist denomination. But he’s willing to wait for more details.

“We’re not going to invent a church in one weekend,” Stephens said.

Jay Williams, pastor of Union (United Methodist) Church in Boston, said that in an uncertain time, UM-Forward had already made a difference in Methodism.

“The language of liberation is now part of our vernacular,” said Williams, a leader of UM-Forward. “The needle has moved.” —United Methodist News Service