

Methodists weigh options for staying united

A 32-member commission is seeking a way forward for a denomination with a lesbian bishop—and a policy barring ordained LGBTQ people.

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#) in the [December 6, 2017](#) issue



Karen Oliveto (left) meets Dixie Brewster (right) for the first time prior to a United Methodist Judicial Council meeting in Newark, New Jersey, in April 2017. Brewster was a petitioner questioning whether a gay or lesbian pastor such as Oliveto can serve as a UM bishop. They said they are praying for each other and the church. At rear is Keith Boyette, who represented Brewster before the council. Photo by Mike DuBose, [UMNS](#).

United Methodists could have a reorganized North American church that gives more autonomy to local or regional bodies under an idea that's gaining traction with a panel charged with tackling the church's crisis over sexuality.

The idea, which prioritizes “contextualization” and removes restrictive language from the United Methodist Church’s Book of Discipline, was one of three that the Commission on a Way Forward presented to the Council of Bishops in November. A second option would create “different branches” of the church that share services, according to a general statement from the Council of Bishops. A third would maintain the status quo, including the current UMC ban on gay clergy and gay marriages.

Although devoid of specifics, new options on the table are giving United Methodists hope for preserving their 12.7-million-member denomination. Conservatives have long favored keeping the present church policy but are indicating they might be open to other possibilities.

“Rather than fight, what happens if, for the sake of the kingdom, we allow people to do what they need to do?” asked Jeff Greenway, council chair of the Wesleyan Covenant Association, an advocacy group that favors keeping the UMC’s gay clergy ban. “And do it with enough organic distance that ‘my money is not paying for that’ or ‘the perspective of the gospel that I might have is not being compromised by the way it’s being lived by other people in the communion.’ It’s an interesting time.”

The 32-member commission is charged with charting options for a denomination so conflicted about sexuality that it has both a lesbian bishop (Karen Oliveto in the Western Jurisdiction) and a policy barring gay and lesbian people from ordained ministry. The bishops are expected to bring one or more of the commission’s recommendations before the whole church at a special General Conference to address the crisis in February 2019.

Observers and activists are increasingly convinced the UMC is already schismatic in the absence of an agreed-upon authority structure to resolve sexuality issues. That acknowledgment could have ripple effects as the denomination comes to grips with where it is and where it’s going.

“In some ways, the Methodist Church is already a church in schism,” said Stephen Swecker, a United Methodist elder who covered the denomination as editor of now-defunct *Zion’s Herald*. “You’ve got a significant number of the annual conferences—and that’s where the battlegrounds are right now—that have said in effect they’re not accepting the rules for ministry prescribed by the denomination.”

Conceding current schism, however, doesn't make a split into two or more denominations a fait accompli.

Ironically, a recognition of the division might open the door for a new type of partnership. It's as if the church were a married but separated couple that wants peace while sorting out the fates of the children, pets, and house in a new paradigm—one that might not involve divorce.

"While I believe we're living in schism, which is a blatant disobedience to authority, I don't think that organic separation into two separate denominations is possible," Greenway said. "It takes too much constitutional change, [and] I don't think the bishops are in favor of it. They have too much equity invested in some form of the present system."

Events of 2017 have reinforced stark fault lines. The Judicial Council, the UMC's high court, upheld long-standing barriers to ministry for "self-avowed practicing homosexuals," including a recent decision blocking a lesbian candidate from being considered for consecration as a bishop in the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference. A previous Judicial Council ruling that Oliveto is not qualified for ordination by virtue of being a "self-avowed practicing homosexual" elicited outrage and defiance from progressives refusing to abide.

"The reaction to it told me there are people who are just seething about this and ready to divide," said Ted Campbell, a historian at Southern Methodist University.

Yet as much as battle lines appear firm, UMC stakeholders are far from resigned to the prospect of breaking apart. Among the forces holding them together are pragmatic considerations. No one, it seems, has a big appetite for spending millions on property battles akin to those that have consumed Episcopalians and Presbyterians for more than a decade. What's more, Campbell said, people on all sides want to avoid a blowup of UMC pension programs, publishing operations, and other administrative functions that have little to do with theological differences.

Such practical concerns, coupled with a long-standing Methodist tilt toward maintaining a big tent whenever possible, are helping fuel bridge-building initiatives. For instance, United Methodist Centrist Movement joined with other activists to launch Uniting Methodists in a bid to broaden its appeal for disciplinary changes that would allow for gay ordination and gay marriage within the denomination but would not require annual conferences or clergy to participate in those practices.

Local churches and annual conferences are doing a four-week study this year based on Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality, a study guide released in May from the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry.

And new possibilities for the future continue to emerge. One idea, discussed at a conference in Atlanta earlier this year, would create new denominations with robust full communion agreements to allow for shared pensions, publishing, and administrative operations. That idea might now be percolating through the “different branches” option that the commission shared with bishops in November.

“I think that was a new idea,” said Campbell, who supports the Uniting Methodists’ approach. “Some people who, going into that meeting would have only supported division into separate denominations, said, ‘yeah, we could probably live with that for practical reasons.’” —*Christian Century*