

The Methodist mess in St. Louis

The UMC's response to declining membership is to spend millions deciding who else we can exclude.

by [William H. Willimon](#)

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

Before the United Methodist Special General Conference opened on Saturday, we prayed. Perhaps God would miraculously grant a fruitful discussion among 800 disputants who have very little in common except our cross-and-flame nametags. We prayed for openness to different points of view, unity, communion, gracious listening, holy conferencing, empathetic feelings, and generosity of spirit.

It didn't work.

At some point I shifted my own prayers to, "Lord, please melt the hardened hearts and smite everyone who intends to vote against the One Church Plan." This plan, recommended by the UMC bishops, aimed to give more discretion to local churches and annual conferences in LGBTQ inclusion, ministry, and mission. It was summarily trashed early in the voting; the rival Traditional Plan, which reaffirms the denomination's prohibitions against same-sex marriage and LGBTQ clergy, was approved.

The Lord, as far as I could tell, had business elsewhere. In fairness to the Lord, months earlier nearly everybody had announced how they would vote on the questions before us. Many vowed that if the outcome was disagreeable to them, they would pack up their congregation and exit the UMC. Ever try to have a church meeting after half of the attendees announce, "If this doesn't go our way, and maybe even if it does, we're leaving"?

Now it is the UMC's turn to experience the agony previously endured by the Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Lutherans, though I fear that our interlocked, connectional polity will make our pain worse. We bishops believed in unity but couldn't figure out how to lead it. As we called for generosity and openness from the podium, Traditional Plan politicians were busy on the floor counting votes and making deals. The Traditional Plan carried the day but with a majority so slim that few could call it a victory. (Every pastor knows not to go into a building program with less than 60 percent of the vote.) Traditionalists and progressives did share one conviction: don't trust bishops.

The misnamed Traditional Plan—little in the 200-year tradition of American Methodism justifies such punitive, exclusionary measures—passed after being amended in a fruitless attempt to overcome its lack of constitutional validity. The traditionalists from the Wesleyan Covenant Association got to go back home proud of the way they had defended "scriptural authority," eager to roll up their sleeves

and go to work tearing asunder the church that produced them.

In the four decades I've been an ordained leader in the UMC, we have lost 30 percent of our membership. Our response? Spend millions of dollars and hours of work to decide who else we can exclude. From what I know of Jesus, I predict he will not deal graciously with the infidelity of this church born in John Wesley's exuberant, extroverted, "Salvation for all!" A chill overtook my once-warmed Wesleyan heart as convention delegates casually discussed the conditions for a "gracious exit." Never had I heard schism so openly affirmed in a church meeting. My question for right-wing schismatics: Do you really think that your vote at General Conference can stop the Trinity from creating LGBTQ Christians and then recklessly sending them to lead Methodist churches?

What now for the UMC? There will be significant losses from LGBTQ Christians and their allies who have given up on the UMC, along with losses from those for whom the UMC will never be confined, closed, and conservative enough. We'll be poorer for the loss of both conversation partners. As for those in the global church who participated in this smackdown of North American Methodist mission and evangelism, they may soon regret the loss of financial support from a considerably weakened North American Methodism.

If any good comes out of this debacle in St. Louis, it may be the recognition of some basic realities.

First, no fundamentally helpful decisions will ever come out of any General Conference, no matter how much prayer precedes it. The General Conference is no longer a viable means of governing the church. Polls showed that the majority of North American United Methodists supported the One Church Plan. Many African and Asian delegates, who come from vital churches full of Holy Spirit-induced innovation, joined the conservatives in dictating to the North American United Methodists the boundaries of our mission and the scope of congregational formation. A big, no-holds-barred, winner-take-all political convention may work for a national political party. It's a disaster for the body of Christ.

Second, over a couple of decades, people my age have constructed the Book of Discipline to serve the interests of our generation, albeit unknowingly. Adaptation or innovation in the general church have been rendered impossible. If there's any good worth doing, there's a rule to be passed to force you to do it. The way to come to a

good decision is through endless meetings followed by coercive, will-to-power voting.

In this Special General Conference we have now declared ourselves to be the church of the aged. The average UM is white and 61 years old. Just like me, my church has got too much past and too little future. I fear that this will be remembered as the week that the UMC decisively, openly turned away from ministry with anyone under 40.

Finally, the Holy Spirit doesn't work from the top down. The Spirit does good from the bottom up, through God's hijinks in the local church. We Methodists may brag that we are "connectional" in organization and episcopal in polity. But, by God's grace, this train wreck may give us the opportunity to rediscover the power of the local and congregational.

The question of LGBTQ clergy and same-sex marriage, insoluble at a corporate-style global gathering of 800 people, is more or less resolved in every congregation I know. The solution may not be one of which I approve, but in a way that somehow works in the present moment for that congregation, in the place where Christ has assembled them, they muddle through. They may still have great differences; they may have lost members because of their solution. There may be repeated, heated arguments. The pastor may be uneasy with and unsure how to lead their work in progress, but they have practiced forbearance because Jesus told them to. They have discovered the adventure of worshiping the Trinity with people with whom they disagree, because, like it or not, those are the folk whom the Lord has convened and made Methodist. They muddle through.

All pneumatology is local, gift of God from the bottom up. Now those of us who still love and linger in the UMC can fully give ourselves to that local task of muddling through. I told my seminarians, "If you are wondering why God Almighty would call somebody like you into the United Methodist ministry, here's your answer. God is calling upon you for assistance to clean up what my generation has messed up." By the grace of God we may rediscover the joy of working with a relentlessly redemptive God who can bring good even out of our mess at General Conference.