

Missed opportunities at the UMC general conference

We took some good steps. But we are too afraid to name certain truths.

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Jesi Lipp, a lay delegate from the Great Plains Conference, reacts after General Conference voted to remove the UMC's ban on the ordination of clergy who are "self-avowed practicing homosexuals"—a prohibition that dates to 1984—during the 2024 United Methodist General Conference in Charlotte, N.C. (Photo by Larry McCormack, UM News)

The theme of the United Methodist general conference in Charlotte, North Carolina, emblazoned on banners, tote bags, and name tags, was a snippet of Psalm 46:

“Know that I am God.” At the end of the second day, as I trudged back to my hotel from the convention center, a man on the sidewalk asked for money. As I reached for my wallet, he peered at my nametag and smirked. “‘Know that I am God’? Think a lot of yourself, do ya?”

Sometimes UMC messaging doesn’t come across as we intended. The message that the general conference wanted to send: “Look! The UMC can have a general conference without shooting ourselves in the foot.” COVID and congregational disaffiliation have inflicted the cruelest cuts in two centuries of US Methodism. In response, we were determined to have the most relentlessly upbeat, obstinately positive general conference ever.

Our longing for affability faced quite a challenge. In the waning hours of the special general conference back in 2019, legislation was passed whereby for the first time in history a Methodist congregation could vote its way out of the denomination, taking church assets and real estate with them. The paragraph was concocted to facilitate exits for progressive congregations, heartbroken over that general conference’s doubling down on restrictive legislation targeting LGBTQ Christians.

Although traditionalists had won the battle to retain the UM Book of Discipline’s restrictive language on sexual orientation, they soon realized that they would never again win the vote. Annual conferences, disgusted by the passage of the 2019 “traditional plan,” booted traditionalists off general conference delegations. Traditionalists retaliated with a massive, unprecedentedly vitriolic campaign against the UMC to pressure congregations to exit the denomination—ironically, using the paragraph that was designed for progressives. As a result, 7,600 congregations, mostly in the Southeast and Texas, moved to break their vow to “be loyal to the United Methodist Church,” taking a quarter of our churches and 1.5 million members. The annual conference I served a decade ago diminished from 165,000 to 60,000 Methodists—in a single afternoon, after less than an hour of discussion.

The disaffiliates’ big idea for renewing an aging, nearly all White, progressively leaning denomination? Use national political polarization as an opportunity to form another White, aging, denomination, this time founded upon a stand-your-ground defense of exclusively heterosexual Christianity. Still, God help me, I miss them—some of them. The occasional virtue-signaling tirade by a preening evangelical doing their “Me love Bible better than you” routine used to liven up general conference afternoons.

Two years of disaffiliation was made worse by the Council of Bishops' failure to agree on unified standards for disaffiliation, making a muddled mess that varied from one annual conference to another. Under coordinated assaults by right-wing groups like *Good News* magazine, the Institute on Religion and Democracy, and the nascent Global Methodist Church, some bishops acquiesced, letting go of hundreds of congregations with minimal fees. "Gracious, loving exit," became some bishops' mantra as they cowered before the threat of litigation. Like most of us clergy, bishops will do anything to avoid the pain of contentious conversations.

While it's hard to put a positive spin on such dramatic loss and episcopal mismanagement, we tried. Council of Bishops president Thomas Bickerton opened the show by telling us to move on and get over our grief, chastising any lurking GMC interlopers, "If you are here to harm or dismantle the UMC, please leave." Good riddance. Scattered applause. Throughout the succeeding days of conferencing, progressives ruled, though gloating was frowned upon. One of the first actions was to end the season for disaffiliation. Delegates overwhelmingly voted to welcome back any disaffiliates who may sour on schism.

Eventually the conference took up the most newsworthy task, removing a phrase that was inserted in the Book of Discipline in 1972: "homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." They also voted to end disciplinary actions against pastors who preside over same-sex marriage, though not before declaring that pastors must obtain the approval of their congregation's board of trustees before conducting such rites. (Trustee approval for a pastor to lead a service of worship? Heretofore unknown in Methodism.)

While it's high time that the UMC changed its restrictive, condemnatory rules related to LGBTQ people, our propensity to do church through top-down rules was how we got in this mess in the first place. General conference, which for most of our history was a meeting every four years for prayer, worship, preaching, and visioning, has become a huge, unmanageable legislative body to produce more rules, attempting to legislate our way out of a mess at the churchwide level. Apparently annual conferences, clergy, and congregations can't be trusted to be Christian. The only way for good to be done is to pass a law to make a church do it. If it's worth doing, it's worth taking two weeks in Charlotte to do it.

Some of us had hoped that the UMC's grim financial realities might prod the general conference into honest reckoning, self-reflection, and thoughtful reorganization and

strategizing in the light of our very different situation as a church. Hope is not a strategy. Positive thinking is not a plan. But by the end of the week, worn out by the grinding parliamentary process (and from having to be so doggedly gracious), delegates had little energy for creative response to or even acknowledgment of the dismal financial facts.

The denomination's fiscal demands upon local congregations and the high cost of Methodist bureaucracy (price tag for this general conference: over \$10 million) were frequent reasons given for disaffiliation. Six years ago the UMC's collection rate for general church funds from local churches was 90 percent; now it's 69 percent. The endangered ministerial pension plan was changed from a guaranteed payout to a system in which disbursements are tied to the market, a portent of pension problems to come. Funds for a bit of the bureaucracy were cut. After laborious debate—765 people attempting to micromanage a huge budget, off the cuff, from the microphone—the conference passed a quadrennial budget of \$346.7 million. That's 42 percent less than the pre-COVID, pre-disaffiliation 2016 budget.

While wrangling over money, some complained about the high cost of bishops—almost 25 percent of the total budget. This fall UMC bishops in the US will be reduced by seven. The conference mood was that the church can move into an uncertain future with less episcopal guidance, maybe because of the lack of leadership from the bishops during disaffiliation.

Huge financial shortfalls and cuts are sure to come, and the status quo will be shaken. The church is stumbling into a very different future, without research, reflection, or guidance from this general conference.

There was a first step toward “regionalization”—giving more autonomy and flexibility to the UMC outside North America—though the move must be approved by the annual conferences. Regionalization is not a bold step forward but rather a belated recognition that we can't sustain the fiction of “united” amid tensions between the UMC in North America and elsewhere. The entire Eurasia Conference (Russia) was allowed to leave the UMC. Some whispered that they're leaving because they fear they can't explain an inclusive church to Putin. Though the UMC has built a wonderful theological school and vibrant congregations in Russia, we were all smiles at their departure. We'd rather let you go quietly, avoiding argument or supplication.

During the regionalization debate, many lamented our colonialist past, as well they should. Nobody noticed the irony of a debate on colonialism waged in an expensive two-week meeting trapped in laborious, time-consuming parliamentary wrangling, in a room where most delegates never get to speak and everything is determined by majority vote, all paid for and dominated by citizens of the colonialist USA. Colonialism takes many forms.

Too scary to mention were the massive church attendance decline and the rapid graying of the denomination. United Methodists are 96 percent white, and 62 percent of them are over age 50.

As a friend of mine said, we shouldn't think too much of ourselves. John Wesley ordered his annual conference meetings around self-reflective questions: What to teach? How to teach? What to do? This general conference did none of that. Incremental, modest, Methodist change, wedded with fantasies of a more prosperous tomorrow, led to collective avoidance of acknowledging a difficult truth: we are a denomination that's aging out of significance.

The week after the conference, I succumbed to my 78th birthday. Looking morosely into the mirror, I thought of the general conference and sighed, "Me and the Methodist church are headed in the same direction." The next move is up to the Lord.