

**A CASE FOR
“SELF-AVOWED PRACTICING HOMOSEXUAL” CLERGY
IN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

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At the Western Jurisdiction Conference (WJC), held on July 16, 2016, at Paradise Valley United Methodist Church (UMC) in Scottsdale, Arizona, Karen Oliveto became the first UMC openly gay bishop. Yet, according to the UMC Book of Discipline, the election of a lesbian bishop is contrary to the denominations' long held stance against homosexuality.¹ Nevertheless, the WJC elected, consecrated, and appointed her bishop over the Rocky Mountain and Yellowstone Conferences. Now, over a year later, UMC clergy still question its validity. Dating back to the 1972 General Conference,² the debate over whether homosexuals can be clergy is between Conservative/Evangelical UMC Clergy and Liberal UMC Clergy. However, according to lead pastor of Floris UMC, Tom Berlin, there are not only two affected groups but there are four: Progressive Non-Compatibilists, Progressive Compatibilists, Traditionalist Compatibilists, and Traditionalist Non-Compatibilists.³ Being more flexible, the inner quadrants, Progressive Compatibilists and Traditionalist Compatibilists, hold their views but are willing to stay in the UMC regardless of the outcome. On the other hand, the two outer quadrants, rigidly hold to their convictions without compromise and are threatening to leave the denomination. Thus, while members of the Western Jurisdiction felt Oliveto was the most qualified spiritual leader for their local jurisdiction,⁴ their decision has global concerns and ramifications for the entire denomination. Despite the ensuing repercussions, the UMC should formally change their stance

¹ 304.3: 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.

² Amanda Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church* (Routledge, 2015), 27.

³ TheFlorisUMC, "LGBTQ and The United Methodist Church," YouTube, May 01, 2017, , accessed May 09, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4HNImGy27B8>.

⁴ "Why We Voted for Bishop Oliveto | 2016 WJ Conference of the UMC," YouTube, April 03, 2017, , accessed May 09, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVaHEVhiyvE>.

on the ordination of “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” in the UMC Book of Discipline, using nonviolent strategies.

To fully engage this issue, it is necessary to first address several factors which influence both Progressives and Traditionalists. These issues are the underlying root, informing psychology, beliefs, and actions. Until they are addressed, change is not possible. Ultimately, the concerns within this debate are over four areas: the interpretation of the Bible, which informs the Book of Discipline, finances, power, and cultural norms. Firstly, the bulk of this debate originates from biblical interpretation. There are two Protestant approaches to biblical interpretation: the Letter of the Law and the Spirit of the Law. The Letter of the Law is the literalist view, which says, “The Bible said it; I believe it and that settles it, end of discussion.” For the literalist, the Bible is the infallible, inerrant Word of God. It is clear, and it means exactly what it says, remaining valid in every century. They require strict adherence to the holy law, boldly rejecting all sin expressed in the Bible, emphasizing the Letter of the Law. The Traditionalist aligns predominantly with the literalist. The opposing contextualist view, however, attempts to find the reasons behind the biblical laws, holding themselves and others to the Spirit of the Law. Their approach focuses more on re-appropriating the original contextual meaning for the original hearers into today’s framework, oftentimes promoting grace and love over legalism. The Progressives fall within this paradigm. The Letter of the Law is an objective view, having the same meaning regardless of person, but the Spirit of the Law is subjective, possibly varying depending on the context. Yet, with these two vastly different approaches, how should the United Methodist Church approach the Holy Writ? Historical examples from the past prove that, used individually, both the Letter of the Law and the Spirit of the Law can be harmful, but used together they can provide accountability in love.

Specifically, the Letter of the Law is a matter of the head, relying heavily on logic and reason. It can appear cold, unforgiving and legalistic, lacking grace. One example of this is the pro-slavery movement in America. From a literalist perspective, the Bible demonstrates

justification of slavery. Bible passages such as Genesis 9:25-27, Genesis 17:12, Ephesians 6:5-9 and First Timothy 6:1-2 promote this claim. Within Scripture, there are no directly anti-slavery views. Presbyterian minister, George D. Armstrong (1813-1899) promoted the Letter of the Law, both seeing slavery as a part of America's Christian duty and arguing that the anti-slavery regime was unscriptural.⁵ The Apostle Paul does not treat slavery as a sin nor an offence.⁶ He merely challenged the evils attached to slavery, not the institution itself. Thus, Armstrong reasoned that the church's biblical response to addressing slavery was to labor to correct the sin, not remove the institution. To declare that slave holding was a sin, when the Bible clearly says it is not, "leads to tampering with God's truth."⁷ They must take God's Word as the ultimate truth. Though others may turn away from them, it was Armstrong's conviction that they should hold themselves accountable to the biblical workings of slavery. While Armstrong's arguments seemed logical and even biblical from a slave owner's perspective, it lacked empathy and love. He willfully remained objective, not attempting to put himself in the role of the slave. Failing to do this caused him to honor laws, order, and principles over people. The downfall of focusing on the Letter of the Law alone is a danger for the Traditionalist.

If the Letter of the Law is a head matter, the Spirit of the Law is a matter of the heart. While it also engages Scripture, it looks through a different lens. It is subjective, focusing on personal experience and reasoning. If the Letter is more rigid, then the Spirit of the Law is flexible and relational. It seeks to love and build relationship with both God and others, encompassing the Golden Rule of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.

⁵ George D. Armstrong, "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery," in *American Religions: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2007), 242.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 244.

Undoubtedly, there is a need for this, yet it can also be harmful when taken to the extreme. It can lead to grace without accountability or “cheap grace:”⁸ deviating from the teaching of Jesus.

Reverend Doctor John Henry Barrows’ (1847-1902) “Words of Welcome” to the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religion, embodied this mindset. This Presbyterian pastor presented the idea that the light of God is in all of us, no matter what our religion. God is “wrought through Buddha and Zoroaster – through the sage of China, and the prophets of India and the prophet of Islam.”⁹ While this pluralistic view welcomes all faiths, it challenges the Christian faith and message. Jesus, in the New Testament claims to be the only Way, the Truth, and the Light (John 14:6). An argument against pluralism is that it “waters down” the gospel message. Grace without accountability can lead to chaos. In the guise of the Spirit of the Law, contemporary Progressives have the temptation of falling into this trap of saying that because of Jesus, everything is permissible. In Romans 6:1-2, Paul questions whether humanity should continue in sin that grace can abound. His answer is “certainly not.” Therefore, while it is dangerous to follow the Letter of the Law alone, it is also equally dangerous to rely solely on the Spirit. Both Progressives and Traditionalists have the tendency to fail to see the validity and concerns of the other’s arguments which would make conversation and potential compromise within the UMC impossible. Yet, if they combine their efforts, it can produce results that remain biblically sound while embodying love and grace. Herein lies a third way.

A historic example of one using both head and heart to approach slavery is Angelina Emily Grimke (1805-1879). She reasoned that men tend to think with their head while women stereotypically think with their heart. Thus, she spoke directly to Southern women’s sympathies

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press, 2015).

⁹ Thomas A. Tweed and Stephen Prothero. *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1999), 129.

while giving them practical and logical examples to empower them when speaking to their husbands. Three head references she used from Scripture were Moses, Jesus Christ, and Paul. While slavery was a part of the Hebrew culture, Grimke argues, “The laws of Moses protected servants in their rights as men and women” from oppression and wrong.¹⁰ On the contrary, the Code Noir of the South completely stripped the slave of all human rights. Concerning Jesus Christ, she agreed with her opposition, who argued that “Jesus Christ did not condemn slavery.”¹¹ She informs them, however, that Jesus spoke to a Jewish audience, of which slavery was not a major issue to address. Thus, slavery was irrelevant to his discourse. Finally, in the case of Paul, Grimke’s antagonists pointed out that the Apostle Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon. She argues here that Paul sent Onesimus back on his own free will. As a Jew, Paul was “bound to protect the runaway.”¹² Onesimus, after conversion under Paul’s ministry, saw the error in his own ways and thus desired to atone for his wrong. Paul did not place him in prison nor return him to his master in chains. Paul merely gave Onesimus a letter to give to Philemon, advising him to receive Onesimus “not as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved.”¹³ Grimke’s understanding of the Bible required her to look deeper into the culture and contextual ramifications of the Scriptures and not to look at the words on the surface.

To female readers, Grimke “appealed to [their] sympathies as women.”¹⁴ She confronted their question, “how can [their] hearts endure [the] persecution”¹⁵ from challenging their husbands. To this Grimke says, various women of the Bible and thereafter stood up against

¹⁰ R. Marie Griffith, “Appeal to Christian Women of the South,” in *American Religions: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2007), 223.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 224.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 230.

social injustices, even to the point of death. She points to the sinfulness of slavery and encourages her readers; if a law commands you to sin then you should break it. Prophets, apostles, martyrs and reformers such as Jael the wife of Haber, Shiphrah and Puah were all willing to suffer for the sake of truth. These Southern women must follow the example of such a cloud of witnesses and hold up the same standard, no matter what the costs. She informs them that they *can* overthrow the horrible system of oppression. Finally, she subjectively pulls on their heartstrings by pleading, “Are you willing to be a slave? Are you willing to see your children the slave of another?” If the answer was no then they were living contrary to the Spirit of the Law. While we do not know the direct effect of her letter to these Southern women, we can see how Grimke’s arguments present a holistic approach that speaks to both the head and the heart.

Thus, these three historic examples of Armstrong, Barrows, and Grimke should help the UMC better understand the specific dangers of using each method alone and how, used together, they can faithfully engage Scripture, while also honoring people in their humanity. Today, Traditionalist Non-Compatibilists see the homosexual clergy debate as a war between righteousness and sin. They view the Bible as a moral corpus or “a law book or source of moral imperatives for behavior; it contains the content of God’s will.” Holding on to the traditional view of Bible interpretation, they view homosexuality as an abomination before God. Like slavery, there are many biblical references against homosexuality; yet, none explicitly justifies it. Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:2, Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 are all biblical arguments for the anti-gay movement. Like Armstrong, they feel it is their moral obligation from God to shun the very appearance of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:22) but do not take the time to honor homosexual clergy in their humanity. Additionally, not only is the Bible presumably on their side, but the UMC Book of Discipline is as well, directly standing against

“ordaining practicing, self-avowed homosexuals.” They argue that all clergy made a confession before God to uphold the bylaws of the church. Not to do this is to be in contempt.

Traditionalists are merely upholding the Letter of the Law. Meanwhile, attempting to combat oppressive theologies, the Progressives’ approach to the Bible is to foster a dialogical encounter between biblical texts and contemporary contexts, allowing for different interpretations of the Bible, not just the traditional. They hold a “view of God who addresses us through the text in a dynamic way rather than a God whose inspiration is statically embodied in the text itself”¹⁶.

While their opponents are making Christianity a book-centered religion instead of a God-centered one¹⁷, they see this as a social justice issue. Instead of emphasizing the law, they emphasize the love of God.

Strict enforcement of the Letter of the Law has led to the loss of numerous lives through hate crimes and suicide. It has ostracized homosexuals, causing them to turn away from God instead of towards God. As the example of Armstrong reinforced, the Letter of the Law without compassion and grace, causes this type of harm. This is easy to do from an objective lens, particularly when it does not directly affect a person or that person’s family, but when combined with the subjective heart, one cannot quietly tolerate injustice. As Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” To continue to use theology to perpetuate hate directly and indirectly, “is to break down the covenant of love; denying equality demeans, perpetuates injustice, and falls short of the example of Jesus and the early church.”¹⁸

While the Traditionalist’s point to the people the UMC could lose by being affirming (Non-Compatibilists), Progressives focus on the people the UMC could gain (marginalized LGBTQ

¹⁶ Primer, 46

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Scott J. Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 233.

people). Traditionalist point to loss of “right” standing with God while Progressives argue that there are other ways to faithfully interpret the Bible.

Hence, while the Bible does speak explicitly on many things, it is easy to take it out of context, and harm others in the process. From issues of slavery to contemporary issues as ordination equality within the UMC, one cannot make a positive impact on people by merely laying down the Letter of the Law. Yet, from religious pluralism of the past until now, if there is merely consent that everything is acceptable, then one does not fully teach the Christian Gospel. The past shows that people must be both objective and subjective to make the most persuasive argument. We must engender both the Letter of the Law and the Spirit of the Law, speaking to the head as well as to the heart to influence the world in which we live. The UMC needs both the Traditionalist and the Progressive perspectives.

The second ramification within the Bishop Olivet debate involves finances and power. Church attendance across all mainline Christian churches is at an all-time low and the United Methodist Church is no different. In 1974, there were 3,621,000 documented members of the UMC globally. In 2010, they reported 3,054,000. The projection for 2050 is 959,000.¹⁹ The threat of a schism would inevitably cause a greater decline. Furthermore, if there is a split according to the UMC polity, the denomination owns United Methodist churches. The local body holds them “in trust.” Therefore, if congregations leave the denomination, they will not be able to keep the land or the church building. This could mean congregations that split might lose everything, from land and churches to the pastor who works for the denomination, not the church.

¹⁹ Ibid.

From a global perspective, 97% of the General Conference budget comes from the USA.²⁰ If a break happens, there would be unfunded pension liabilities, which would affect the retirement of elderly clergy who invested in the church's "social security." Likewise, the denomination supports various hospitals and schools in vulnerable areas in places such as parts of Africa and Venezuela. Without the financial support of the UMC, these communities will not have access to the educational and medical support in which the UMC provides.

The Traditionalists Non-Compatibilists have the most to lose regarding power. Holding to the Traditionalist view of marriage provides a sense of security and pride. Some have placed their entire identity and beliefs of their interpretation of the Bible. To challenge that is to shake their core beliefs, causing a crisis of faith. For them, this could mean, everything they built their lives on is a lie. LGBT Christians have had years of living under the anti-gay regime. Though uncomfortable and undesirable, they grew up in a hetero-normative society, so many know how to manage. The lack of power for the "people in power," or the Traditionalists who are used to having the majority, challenges their entire perspective of the world. There is the "one sum" mentality that says that there are only so many positions to go around. The rise in homosexual ordained ministers does not necessarily take away the positions for heterosexual clergy. If anything, it adds to it. The Bible says, the harvest is ripe, but the laborers are few. In today's culture, there is a need for more laborers to work in the vineyard. Yet, as recent U.S. history has shown, when the "majority" begins to feel this way, they will do anything necessary to maintain said power, including reverting to violence. To change interpretations could result in a loss of pride; yet the Bible says in Proverbs 16:18 that pride comes before destruction.

²⁰ Ibid.

Additionally, there may also be the fear that LGBTQ people will push their “gay agenda” on everyone else including the children, creating a contemporary Sodom and Gomorrah (according to the traditional interpretation thereof). This is a fallacy whose premise is that straight people would turn gay if given the opportunity. This belief has no merit.

Notwithstanding, Traditionalists are not the only ones affected by the power struggle. On the opposite side, Progressives argue they are fighting for equality for all. For so long LGBTQ people lived in oppression. The United States Supreme Court now recognizes marriage between same-gender loving individuals; yet, the UMC still does not. Some LGBTQ people are dying, losing hope, and not coming to church because society and the church traditionally have not been there for them. Others are recipients of demonization and ostracization, even from their families. Progressive Non-Compatibilists have decided to no longer passively sit by and accept this abuse. Their desire is to create a safe space for LGBTQ to come into the “kin-dom of God” through the United Methodist Church. The election of the first openly gay bishop was a step in the right direction, making a denominational statement that LGBTQ are people of God, who God can use for ministerial service. Conversely, to overturn the Bishop Oliveto could show support of homophobia from a denominational level. It could also lead in witch-hunts for the removal of any other practicing LGBTQ pastors.

Finally, the Oliveto debate stems from cultural norms. There are various norms and ideologies, which do not hold true across cultural lines. With the United States Supreme Court ruling on marriage equality, for example, the LGBTQ clergy have the backing of the government to help their cause. Some governments in the East, however, hold a conservative view. For example, it is against the law for someone to be a homosexual in some parts of the world (mainly

parts of Africa and the Middle East), which could lead to imprisonment and death.²¹ Thus, UMC pastors in these areas are not only policing the law of the church but of their cultures. If they provide affirming spaces for practicing LGBTQ individuals, it could put all parties in grave danger. While the specific laws within these countries are outside of the jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church, that does not limit the UMC from encouraging dialogue between Progressives and Traditionalists within these cultures, exposing these clergy to views that differ from their own, for the sake of understanding. Furthermore, the UMC has had a history of fighting for social justice. If Traditionalist African pastors, for example, were to change their stance and decided to fight the anti-gay government, the global UMC would probably be able to stand in solidarity with them, providing financial support as well as resources. Violence from these governments would ensue, making the use of nonviolent methods critical.

Despite the global concerns of anti-gay Bible interpretations, power struggles, financial ramifications, and cultural norms, the UMC should still formally change its stance in their Book of Discipline. The first reason the UMC should change their stance is because they already have “self-avowed practicing homosexuals.” On May 9, 2016, one hundred and eleven self-professed, practicing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, and Queer (LGBTQ), ordained, UMC clergy, stood in support of Oliveto. Thus, there are currently ordained LGBTQ clergy. Even with this amount of LGBTQ ordained clergy who openly stood in solidarity with Oliveto, not to mention those LGBTQ clergy who did not formally make their profession, this issue did not make national and international news until Olivet became a bishop. Oliveto legally married her wife, Robin Ridenour in 2014 while serving as the Senior Pastor of Glide Memorial Church; one of the

²¹ Siobhan Fenton, "LGBT relationships are illegal in 74 countries, research finds," The Independent, May 17, 2016, , accessed May 11, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/gay-lesbian-bisexual-relationships-illegal-in-74-countries-a7033666.html>.

largest UM churches in San Francisco, known for its “radical inclusion.” Therefore, for at least two years prior to her bishopric she was an openly gay pastor. This insinuates that, contrary to the UMC Book of Discipline, there can be openly LGBTQ pastors but not openly LGBTQ bishops in the United Methodist Church. To not allow a lesbian bishop but to permit LGBTQ clergy creates a double standard. To permit these individuals to continue in ministry but not to change the Book of Discipline is also hypocritical. If these “open” and “closeted” LGBTQ clergy received election as candidates fit for ministry, then the Book of Discipline should reflect such.

Within the General Conference 2000, they “rejected petitions that would have denied membership to homosexuals and that would have denied ordination to people who supported the ordination of homosexuals.”²² Yet, the current Book of Discipline denies ordination to “self-avowed practicing homosexuals,” reasoning that it is “incompatible with Christian teaching.”²³ Thus, a person can support the ordination of homosexuals, but cannot be an ordained homosexual according to the Book of Discipline. This creates further contradiction. The UMC “professes to be an inclusive church.”²⁴ Section VI, paragraph 140 of the 2016 Book of Discipline states, “The mark of an inclusive society is one in which all persons are open, welcoming, fully accepting, and supporting of all other persons, enabling them to participate fully in the life of the church, the community, and the world,” yet this is not the case for LGBTQ clergy.

Also, LGBTQ are just as capable, if not more capable of doing ministry as anyone else. Through the life and witness of Jesus, he regularly went to the marginalized: the poor, the

²² Amanda Udis-Kessler, *Queer inclusion in the United Methodist Church* (Routledge, 2015), 37.

²³ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016* (Cokesbury, 2017), 226.

²⁴ Tex Sample and Amy E. DeLong, *The Loyal Opposition: Struggling with the Church on Homosexuality* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 75.

widows, the orphans. This is to whom the Bible often calls Christians to minister. As a marginalized group, LGBTQ clergy can empathize with and can have greater compassion for ministry and can boldly go out proclaiming “the good news of God’s grace,”²⁵ because they understand the struggles of those to whom they are to minister: sharing a similar plight.

Furthermore, God loves everyone, including LGBTQ clergy. The mainline church is dying. Part of this is because fundamentalist religion has used the Letter of the Law alone, for so long. The Letter of the Law alone is often harmful as seen in the argument for slavery. Many LGBTQ lives have been lost or hurt over the anti-gay stance of the church. Through the witness of Jesus, we see the love of God for all humanity. Yet, the common rhetoric of the anti-gay movement of years past is “God hates Gays/Fags.” Even unspoken, this theology does not draw people to God but pushes them away from God. As followers of Christ, God never calls us to judgment (Matthew 7:1): that is God’s job, but to love (1 John 4:7-10). The same way history reinterpreted the Bible for African Americans and for Women, the UMC must do the same for LGBTQ people. They must use their heads and their hearts, embracing them as children loved by God and not as outcasts. Through Jesus life, death, and resurrection, non-Jews received adoption into God’s family (Romans 8:17). No one can do anything to deserve this love nor to separate from God’s love (Romans :31-39). Although the Bible is a closed canon, it is a living document that we are ever grappling with, particularly as it relates to morality and social justice. Our understanding today differs from the cultural understanding one hundred years ago. It is within our interpretations and re-interpretations that the Bible can continue to speak to contemporary settings.

²⁵ Scott J. Jones, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 225.

Finally, although there are financial and cultural reasons, to not change because of these is also unethical: placing money over people. Jesus calls us to the messy work of caring for souls by building bridges to the “least of these.” The repercussions of living out the Gospel of Love maybe challenging and life threatening, yet, LGBTQ people have endured this suffering both outside and inside the church for centuries. Whatever the church must endure to affirm and reclaim God’s children, it is worth the sacrifice and is in keeping with Jesus who was willing to lose his life to save others.

The last major question in the debate is can the “United” Methodist Church remain unified? This would require all parties (or at least a quorum) to come to a compromise. Concerning polity, they would have to do the tedious work of reinterpreting and rewording the parts of the Book of Discipline pertaining to sexuality based upon the agreed outcome. Yet, even among the factions, there are different meanings of “compromise.” Some hold to the mindset that UM conferences should independently determine if they will or will not allow pastors to marry LGBTQ people within their jurisdiction or to become clergy; they do not need to have a national or international consensus. Each jurisdiction could decide for itself while the UMC remained united. Traditionalist Non-Compatibilists, though, argue that they will not be a part of a denomination, which explicitly condones such practices; even though such practices have already been going on. Among both Progressive and Traditionalist Non-Compatibilists, there tends to be a spiritual elitism, unswervingly declaring, “we are right, they are wrong,” which further, hinders compromise. Therefore, it is important to approach this matter using nonviolent methods, engaging both head and heart.

When discussing the problem, it is also important to offer solutions of hope. Techniques of nonviolence tend to come from the stance of the oppressed since they are the ones fighting for

equality. The Traditionalist already has been in power. The Progressives are the ones seeking to gain power. Because of this, the following tactics tend to be one sided, focusing on techniques the Progressives can use. Thus far, there are various non-violent tactics that Progressives have used to support their cause; such as picketing, writing letters and displaying flags and symbolic colors, although “in a lot of people’s thinking that closes a lot of doors.”²⁶ Other techniques gleaned from *The 198 Methods of Nonviolent Protest and Persuasion* by Gene Sharp, which Progressives may or may not have used already, are:

- Video testimonials of how people in the LGBTQ community has been hurt by the church
- Propaganda cartoons
- Mock funeral/memorial for all the LGBTQ UMC members who died
- Boycott anti-gay pastors/churches
- Nonviolence sit-ins; Attend anti-gay churches in large numbers wearing rainbow flags
- Mock LGBTQ weddings at churches

All of these methods could help provide greater awareness and solidarity for Progressives inside and outside of the UMC.

A major goal of these nonviolent methods is to minimize contention by providing space for people to hear each other’s side. This takes time. One vehicle is to have people from within the four quadrants (Progressive Non-compatibilists, Progressive Compatibilists, Traditionalist Compatibilists, and Traditionalist Non-Compatibilists), go to lunch together at one of the international conferences. The objective is for them to talk to each other and get to know each other on a personal level. They would not talk about sexuality, per se, but find out about each other and form relationships. This could help minimize the “US vs. THEM” paradigm, allowing all parties to see, we are all humans with the same basic wants and needs. If needed, we can provide some basic Conversation Starter questions.

²⁶ Amanda Udis-Kessler, “*Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church*” (Routledge, 2015), 185.

Another suggestion is to have a brainstorming session in multiple phases. This can be with a large group (10-20) or a small group (4-8). Within this group, they will come up with a Group Covenant. They will discuss what type of environment they can agree upon, such as “non-judgmental” or “respecting everyone’s opinion.” Someone would write this out and display it on a screen using a laptop and a projector or on a large sheet of paper. If someone is not abiding by the agreed upon covenant, they are dismissed after the second offense.

In the second phase, they would start by coming up with things that people on all sides could agree upon, which might include “God is love” or “we are family, we do not always agree but we still love each other.” If an idea does not reach consensus, it does not make it on the board. With this groundwork laid, in the last two phases, they will come up with an agreed list of what they want and do not want for the United Methodist Church. This might include, “we want to come to a compromise,” or “we do not want to split.” These “want” and “do not want” lists can set the parameters for the group, which could help steer further discussion. For instance, if all sides do not want to have a split, they are more likely to work to find a win-win solution.

A third activity could be to read and have weekly discussions about, “The Bible’s YES to Same-Sex Marriage: An Evangelical’s Change of Heart” by Mark Achtemeier and “People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality is Not Just an Issue” by Preston Sprinkle. People all over the world can do this through Skype or an online forum. Many people have heard biblical arguments against homosexuality, however many have not heard someone address those same Scriptures *in context*, as an argument for same-sex marriage. In “The Bible’s YES to Same-Sex Marriage: An Evangelical’s Change of Heart,” theologian and ethicists, Mark Achtemeier faithfully makes his case using the very writ used by his opponents. This could be very helpful for everyone, yet there must be commitment to engage the text actively and seriously. In a similar manner, Preston

Sprinkle also provides a biblical and scholarly interpretation of why homosexuality is wrong. These two resources together can provide a well-rounded discussion for the UMC, allowing people to consider and articulate their reasoning and theology outside of just saying, “the Bible says,” without any further discourse to back up their claim.

A fourth activity, which would work well after the third activity is to have a formal, diplomatic debate at a conference. Each side will have to argue for the opposing view. For example, Progressives will fight for the view that Bishop Oliveto’s election is not legitimate, something they do not believe. Traditionalists would have to argue in the affirmative. The purpose of this is to help people better understand the other side. It is one thing to say you understand the other side. It is a different story to have to prove the counter-argument. If nothing else, this practice helps people begin to put themselves in their opponent’s shoes; providing greater understanding

A final activity, which they could do in small groups at the conference, is to engage the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience). Being Methodist, many should be familiar with this. Each person would put them in order based on which one has higher rank in their lives. For instance, a gay man might place Scripture as last because the church used Scripture to condemn him. Once complete, each person would show their ranking and defend why they put it in this order. This could open rich discussion, but there must be strict adherence to the Group Covenant of mutual listening and respect. No one should feel ashamed by the group, to share his or her honest feelings. These suggested activities would hopefully create a spirit of peace while allowing the UMC to move forward, whatever the final decision maybe.

In conclusion, the UMC should change their stance on homosexuality in the Book of Discipline. LGBTQ people are already serving as clergy in the UMC and are just as capable of

doing ministry as anyone else. From the past, we can learn that The Letter of the Law has been harmful over the years. Thus, we should not make the same mistakes by looking at one interpretation of the Bible. Thirdly, the mainline church is dying; being labelled as hypocritical and irrelevant. If God called a person to ministry, regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation, who is there to judge. Concerning the “how” of change, the use of nonviolence is a slow process. Things do not change instantly. The same proves here in the UMC. Yet, change will not come if the quadrants do not listen to and respecting each other’s differences. While this matter has reached global news in the UMC, it is a concern that every Christian church will continue to grapple with; hopefully through nonviolent strategies. Ideally, the United Methodist Church will be able to work through their differences and stay united, however this should not be at the cost of discrimination against any group. How can two walk together unless they agree? If they are not able to come to an agreement, deciding to go two different ways is not the end of the world. Although there is a lot at stake if they do split, the United Methodist Church has other exemplars such as the Presbyterian Church (USA), who have already addressed this issue in their polity and the ramifications thereof who can assist in guiding them along the way. Hopefully, that is not be the result. Regardless of the outcome, Progressives “owe it to the church” not abandon it but “to at least continue to converse, to learn, to talk, in hopes that somewhere there’s a compromise out there which may now just be a flickering candle on some horizon but maybe can become a reality.”²⁷

²⁷ Amanda Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church* (Routledge, 2015), 186.