

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

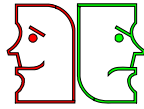
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BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

Two church disagreements in the news

Secular news media have reported more than usual lately about conflict within the United Methodist Church, and the news is upsetting quite a few UMC members. On the surface, this conflict seems to be only about UMC rules. However, the disagreements causing the conflict exist among all Christians, and they aren't just about organizational matters. They reflect major differences in beliefs about the authority and nature of the Bible, and even about what God is like.



These differences are so strongly felt, and resolving them by creating church rules seems so impossible, that I wonder if we really need the rules that are the basis of the current UMC conflict. Couldn't we just let members with different understandings of God and the Bible apply those as they see fit?

Disagreement about same-sex marriage



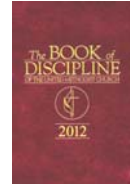
A big current disagreement in the UMC is about whether UMC clergy should be allowed to perform same-sex marriage ceremonies. A UMC rule forbids it, but a clergyman recently disobeyed the rule by performing a marriage for his gay son, and as a result his credentials were removed. Many other clergy who believe the UMC rule is unjust are also disobeying it, either by performing such marriages or by supporting fellow clergy who perform them.

This disagreement is an outgrowth of the much larger disagreement among Christians about whether homosexuality is a sin. Many Christians' answer to this question depends on whether they think it is a choice or an innate characteristic. Those who see it as a choice and therefore a sin tend to see it as sin mainly because several Bible verses seem to define it as sin. But this view depends on seeing all the Bible's words as the timeless, literal words of a person-like God.



UMC rules are hard to change

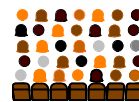
The UMC's official rules, policies, and doctrines are stated in its *Book of Discipline*, whose contents can be changed only by votes of the worldwide UMC's top decision-making body, General Conference. It meets only once every four years (next in 2016) and has nearly 1000 voting delegates, half clergy and half lay, who come from UMCs all over the world. The election process starts almost 2 years before each General Conference, with each local congregation electing one or more of its members to attend the annual meeting of the regional body that elects that region's General Conference delegates.



Some hard at work early, others oblivious

Even before this process starts, many groups start working to get supporters of their views elected and to keep opponents from being elected. Yet many UMC members aren't even aware when their local church election happens. And some lay representatives get chosen mainly for their willingness and ability to attend the yearly regional session, rather than for their knowledge of UMC structure and the issues that will come before General Conference.

At General Conference, delegates vote on changes in the *Discipline* that UMC groups and individuals have requested. But requests are now so numerous, and many are so long and complex, that many are adopted or rejected by consensus rather than voted on individually or even read by every delegate.



The results of a chaotic process

The *Discipline* has mushroomed in size during its more-than-200-year existence. Besides newer rules, it includes doctrine that originated in early Christian councils, and rules created by Methodism's founder, John Wesley. Some are in the language of earlier centuries and don't reflect more recent findings about the Bible, history, the universe, and human beings. Also, many *Discipline* statements are inconsistent with others, because statements are continually added and removed without consideration of the book as a whole. So changing UMC rules is hard and slow. Even understanding some of them is, too.

Other Christians believe that sexual orientation is an innate characteristic, so isn't sinful. They also tend to see the Bible as a human document reflecting time-bound features such as the writers' culture, personalities, and lack of knowledge about the natural world, therefore incomplete and containing error.



Another factor in Christians' disagreements about same-sex marriage is their disagreement about male and female roles and about whether the sole purpose of marriage is the creation of children. But here, too, differences in views about the nature and thus the authority of Bible verses play a big part.

Disagreement about Communion

The other current UMC disagreement is about whether the sacrament of Holy Communion should be administered only to people who are physically “gathered.” Turmoil over this arose when a UMC pastor proposed to offer Communion on the Internet. Participants would simply locate some grape juice and any available bread or crackers, and consume them after the pastor in the sanctuary blessed them. The pastor planning to offer Communion in this way explained that United Methodists believe that God is not bound by space and time, therefore that God will bless the bread and cup wherever people are worshipping with us.



“Give your self and your life, as I have”

This disagreement should make us re-think what Communion means and what aspects of it matter. For most Christians, taking Communion (Eucharist, The Lord's Supper) essentially is enacting a ritual based on the last meal that the Bible describes Jesus sharing with his disciples. Christians consider it a sacrament—an action through which God's presence is made apparent. Some Christians believe that the bread and wine or juice used in the Eucharist become the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ. Many apparently believe that the scriptural statement “Do this in remembrance of me” is a direct quote from Jesus, spoken after his eating bread and drinking wine with his disciples, and that he meant that all future disciples must do these same physical actions regularly, maybe even in order to be forgiven of their sins and “saved” from hell.



However, I don't see the Bible as containing direct quotes from Jesus or words to be taken literally. To me, its account of the Last Supper is a symbolic statement. Thus the Christian sacrament of Communion, like other sacraments, is a symbolic act, and not a compulsory one for us or one that cancels our sins. I believe that, as in other verbal and visual symbolism, here a body represents a person's whole self, and blood represents life. So to me, Jesus's statement seems to be saying “In remembrance of me, give your whole self as I have given mine, and give your life as I have given mine.”

Must we be physically together?

It seems to me that we could legitimately make that commitment in an online gathering as well as in a physical gathering. Online gatherings weren't possible when Jesus lived, but that shouldn't mean they can't be useful for the church now. There's definitely a difference between being with someone in person and being with that person online, but does it affect the validity of the sacrament of Communion? I doubt it.

Several denominations offer online Communion, but a group of UMC pastors and theologians have objected to the UMC's doing it. They say Communion must be celebrated with a physically gathered community. Other UMC leaders say the practice would destroy ties between the UMC and the ecumenical community, evidently because online observance might conflict with others' beliefs about what kind of bread and drink must be used or how the requirement of their being blessed and administered only by clergy was interpreted. As a result of these objections, the UMC Council of Bishops has declared a moratorium on all online sacraments and called for further study of which ones would be acceptable online.



Can we know God's rules precisely?

Of course, neither a temporary moratorium nor a new church rule will solve disagreements about matters of belief, such as those on which same-sex marriage or online Communion are based. Yet churches seem to feel they must have specific rules about such things. Many members want to feel sure that their church's doctrinal claims are true and that its rules

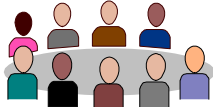
express God’s will. This goes with seeing the Bible as a literal, timeless, and unique expression of God’s views, therefore considering church rules and doctrine true if they quote from the Bible.

But other Christians feel that no one can describe God or know God’s will perfectly, and that not all Bible verses are literally God’s truth. These Christians want their church to acknowledge the uncertainty inherent in trying to describe God or say what God’s will is, and they don’t think a church needs to require all members to have exactly the same understandings of the Bible and Christianity.

A voluminous, inconsistent rule book

Like most churches, the UMC isn’t willing to approve of such differences. It tries to say exactly what its members should believe and what its clergy must do and avoid doing. But the book containing its rules and beliefs has grown so much over the years, and changes have been made with so little attention to internal consistency, that disagreements over what the UMC must have rules about, and whether UMC groups and pastors have violated the existing rules, have now become numerous, heated, and based on increasingly small details.

Violations are officially determined by the UMC’s 9-member Judicial Council. Its current president is Dr. William B. Lawrence, a clergyman who is dean of SMU’s Perkins School of Theology, a UMC seminary. He has written extensively about UMC history and structure and has taught courses on UMC polity, and he regularly works with church leaders all over the world, so I asked his views about the proliferation of rules and the increasing conflict within the UMC.



In his view, the UMC’s main difficulty in resolving disagreements is that it tries to make theological decisions primarily through legislative acts. Yet in order to be worthy of the name “church,” Bill Lawrence believes, a church must conduct its activities through theological endeavors.

Everything must be reduced to legislation

“When United Methodists want to change a practice within the life of the denomination,” Lawrence explains, “they can petition the General Conference to amend the *Discipline*. Therefore, everything has to be reduced to legislation. The General Conference is, by our Constitution, a legislative body. It cannot do anything unless it can find a way to encase a proposed change in law. It is unprepared to have theological conversations.”


The only way the General Conference can discuss the sacraments, for example, is legislatively. “It can ponder who may preside at Holy Communion,” Bill Lawrence points out, “or what elements can be used. But the General Conference is ill-equipped to discuss sacraments theologically.”

Lawrence observes that 200-year-old provisions in the UMC Constitution were designed to discourage the church from being blown to and fro by the winds of doctrine. But the UMC hasn’t been willing to create a serious body to study its doctrine or theology. “We ask ordination candidates,” he points out, “if they have studied our doctrines and if they believe them to be in accord with scripture, but we don’t discuss what those doctrines are! We assume that everybody knows.”



In Bill Lawrence’s view, “no one wants to discuss the theological issues because we do not have a mechanism for doing so. We turn all theological

Most back issues, a list of books I’ve written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. For paper copies of any of the 20 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I’m a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

consideration into legislative devices, then we write laws, then the *Discipline* expands by individual amendments, then it develops internal incoherence.”

“The Judicial Council,” Lawrence continues, “can only address issues from a constitutional or legislative perspective. That leaves only the Council of Bishops to think and act theologically. They alone have responsibility for overseeing the spiritual and temporal affairs of the church. If they do not or will not focus on those, no other entity in the church can.”



What will come next?

What will happen to the UMC if it keeps depending only on legislation, clinging to outdated doctrines and language, and adding more and more rules? How can a group so large and so diverse do theological thinking and make theological decisions? How could the UMC’s existing procedures create a mechanism for doing that? What kind of mechanism could it be? And how could the UMC get its global membership to agree on who would be part of it, and on how it would make decisions that had to apply to the whole UMC and be accepted by it? Those are important but hard questions.

Barbara



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Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple TX 76504-3629

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Will over-regulation lead to reformation? Revolution?

Besides being concerned about the UMC’s making theological decisions by legislative methods, Bill Lawrence is also concerned about its adding more rules. He mentions an observation made by Dr. Craig Dykstra, retired Vice President of the Lilly Endowment. Dykstra found that in the life cycle of institutions, the final stage before a reformation or revolution is the regulatory stage. In it, institutions try to manage their future and control their effectiveness by legislative actions, restrictive policies, and limiting regulations. Lawrence knows that in order to exist, an institution must have policies to manage personnel, programming, revenue, and expenditures. But he sees that having rules that are too numerous and too restrictive can harm an institution.

Is the UMC’s legalistic, rule-oriented system leading toward reformation? Revolution? Would one of those be harmful? Or might it lead to following Jesus more closely?



Website

Several *Connections* readers have sent helpful suggestions about how to re-do my website. But the upshot seems to be that I must start from scratch, either creating a new website myself or hiring someone to do it. Either way will take a while.

For now, if you don’t have the October, November, or December 2013 issues of *Connections* and want them, let me know and I’ll e-mail or snail-mail them to you. Neither they nor this January 2014 issue are on my website yet.