

Last week many of us in the United Methodist tradition were surprised to see headlines in many media outlets referring to the “split” that has taken place in the United Methodist Church. As a child who grew up in a United Methodist Church here in the Tri-cities, an Ordained United Methodist Pastor for the past 24 years and a veteran of many church polity changes and institutional battles, I felt it appropriate to share my thoughts.

The United Methodist Church is in a difficult situation. To quote my good friend Rev. Geoff Helton (also a product of Tri-cities UMC’s) “The United Methodist Church is hurting.” The UMC has been deeply divided for years over issues of human sexuality and inclusion, or lack of inclusion, of LGBT persons. Those issues and divisions are deep and touch on some of the fundamental beliefs we hold about Divinely Inspired Scripture, humanity’s relationship with God, and our relationship with each other as disciples of Jesus. Those divisions have become increasingly entrenched by both sides of the issue and has made it increasingly difficult for many of us to faithfully live out a call to be disciples of Jesus that transform the world, in the midst of such deep divisions that separate us. Last week it was announced that a small group of 16 leaders in our denomination, who represent a wide variety of positions along the spectrum of these issues, had been meeting and had negotiated a plan for separation. The plan would allow for churches and Annual Conferences to disaffiliate with the UMC and reaffiliate with newly created Wesleyan denominations. The negotiations addressed church property, some theological issues as well as some other issues that have been areas of contention in our polity for churches and groups wanting to disassociate from the UMC. This plan is by no means final, and in no way “official”. It is the plan of 16 people who took it upon themselves to negotiate a way past the impasse that our church is facing. The group was not commissioned by the General Conference of our church. General Conference, which meets every four years (except for special-called sessions), is the only body that can make these changes. Our denomination’s next General Conference meets in May of 2020.

What the press release and news stories do highlight, is that there is an increasing momentum and desire for our churches to move in directions that allow them to live out their calling in a way that agrees with their understanding of God, the church and their theological understandings. This plan is not the only plan “out there”. Several other groups have been meeting in less secretive manners to present similar proposals to our General Conference in May.

What I and other United Methodists are asking is “If such a plan to separate over these issues does come to a reality what does it mean for me and the church I attend?” The answer I can give for the church I serve – Kennewick First United Methodist Church, is that the leadership of our Annual Conference has explicitly expressed that churches and their members can live out who and what they believe God is calling them to be. We won’t be forced into a position of either opposing or supporting same sex marriages or forced to accept an LGBT pastor. I would add that for the church I serve and for the other United Methodist churches in

the Tri-cities and surrounding area, it is an opportunity to seriously consider what and who we are called to be, not merely as United Methodists, but as disciples of Jesus.

For over a hundred years Kennewick First UMC has been in this community because we believe everyone is a beloved child of God, who can experience God's spirit, and that we should work to create a world that reflects the justice, reign and grace of God. From the earliest days of meeting above a tavern on main street in Kennewick, to the days of hosting community events like high school graduations, community concerts and civil rights rallies in the late 60's, to our willingness to work for systematic change in our culture to address those things that push people to the margins and devalues them. We are a wide variety of people with differing opinions on issues like sexuality and a variety of others. We are Republicans and Democrats. We represent a variety of ethnic groups and cultures. We are young and old. We sometimes disagree but are committed to learning from one another. Our leadership is committed to be a community where anyone can experience the love of God. So to my friends in this tradition we call United Methodists I would encourage us to not get lost in the "what if's" that are swirling around us, but strive to grow in our relationship with God and treat each other and everyone we meet in the community we love, with the same love, justice and grace God has shown us!

Rev. Mark McMurray

"If you would like to see the press release put out by the college of Bishops follow this link: <https://www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/newsdetail/united-methodist-traditionalists-centrists-progressives-bishops-sign-agreement-aimed-at-separation-13133654>

If you would like to read the " PROTOCOL OF RECONCILIATION & GRACE THROUGH SEPARATION" in its entirety follow this link: <https://cdnsc.umc.org/-/media/umc-media/2020/01/03/15/48/Protocol-of-Reconciliation-and-Grace-through-Separation>