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Colorado Springs Methodists consider leaving historic denomination amid LGBTQ exclusion

By: STEVE RABEY Religion Correspondent May 6, 2019 Updated May 11, 2019



But some local Methodist pastors say the loss they're experiencing now is more painful. They believe they are witnessing the demise of their denomination, leaving them both heartbroken and confused about the direction forward.

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"I'm a fifth-generation United Methodist clergyman, and in my mother's womb I was woven for this purpose," said Rev. Olon Lindemood, senior pastor of Sunrise United Methodist Church on Briargate Boulevard.

"But to me, our General Conference's vote for the Traditional Plan that enforces exclusion of LGBTQ members from marriage or ordination feels like the death of my church."

Rev. David Amrie, senior pastor of Calvary United Methodist Church on Austin Bluffs Parkway, shares the feelings of grief over a February vote at the UMC's General Conference that was upheld by an April ruling from the denomination's Judicial Council.



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"I think the honest thing to say is that the United Methodist Church as I have known it passed away in February," Amrie said, "and I think the future for those of us who hold more progressive points of view is uncertain."

For decades, Methodists have stuck together while arguing about human sexuality.

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The plan, which will go into effect in North America on January 1, 2020, reaffirms the denomination's 1972 statement that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian living. It also adds new enforcement powers to discipline or dismiss gay and lesbian clergy, including Denver-based Bishop Karen Oliveto, the denomination's first lesbian bishop.

Now, more progressive congregations— including a handful of local churches — are considering the new “disaffiliation” clause that allows them to keep their church property and leave the UMC.

Rev. Kent Ingram, senior minister of First United Methodist Church in Colorado Springs, the state's largest, has met with groups that may form a new progressive Methodist network or denomination.

“It has become increasingly clear that we can't exist the way we exist now as a church, and a lot of conversations are going on,” Ingram said.

“I keep telling my people that we're going to be part of the broad and generous United Methodist Church that has represented people called Methodists for years and years. We're going to fight the good fight at this point.”

Rev. Tong Soo Han, the pastor of the Korean American United Methodist Church on Carefree Circle, says he and his 300-member congregation support the Traditional Plan.

“Ninety-five percent of America's Korean Methodist churches support the Traditional Plan,” he said, “so we are closer to the Asian and African members of the global church.”

Rev. Tong said American churches are running ahead of global churches and cited



A long legacy

Methodists in England dispatched missionaries to the American colonies in the 1760s, and circuit-riders on horseback planted churches in towns and cities across the country, helping the American church grow rapidly before it split during the Civil War years.

The current UMC was formed from a merger of various groups in 1968, bringing back together some of the churches that slavery had divided. The church has nearly eight million U.S. members and another six million worldwide, and up until now, it has provided a sometimes-contentious church home for people as different as Hillary Clinton and Jeff Sessions.

Now, disagreements over sexuality threaten to break things up again.

Disagreements about homosexuality have threatened to disrupt denominational gatherings for decades, but the passage of the Traditional Plan at February's special session on homosexuality stunned progressives.

Rev. Amrie of Calvary United Methodist Church has long valued the UMC's "principles of grace which encourages every one of us to work out questions of faith for ourselves.

"We Methodists have never, until now, insisted on a particular interpretation of scripture or a particular way of living out our faith," Amrie said.

"But in February, the General Conference said that our way forward as a denomination was through a traditionalist, fundamentalist approach to scriptures, and I am not there.

"Our whole energy as a denomination has focused on this one issue for 50 years. But



“We’ve been hung up on this one issue when what we need to be focusing on is how do we live together in the reign of God and build a beloved community where it doesn’t matter whom you love, it only matters that you do love.”

“I believe that there’s something next for us, even though I don’t know what it is yet. But I know that the United Methodist Church as it is will exist Jan. 1 is not the United Methodist Church that I would join myself.

“I expect that the UMC structure will implode, including our seminaries, our hospitals, and other organizations. What this will look like, only God knows. Our congregation is going to be spending the next six months sorting that out.”

Dashed hopes and defiance

After February’s vote, some progressives held out hope that the UMC’s Judicial Council would declare the Traditional Plan unconstitutional.

But in April, the Council upheld the plan, while declaring some of its provisions unconstitutional. One provision had called for investigations of clergy candidates to determine if they are practicing homosexuals, while another would have required candidates to certify their support for rules in the UMC’s Book of Discipline.

Bishop Karen Oliveto leads the Mountain Sky Conference, which includes Colorado. Her May 1 statement expressed defiance, declaring the Traditional Plan “an affront to many in our annual conference who have had the experience of receiving God’s love through the lives and ministries of LGBTQ people.

“The mandatory penalties belie the grace that has always been a foundation of our United Methodist tradition, which expressed itself in seeking just resolution and reconciliation rather than legalistic rules and punishments.”



Meanwhile, Rev. Ingram of First United Methodist Church has been busy “working on what a new expression of Methodism would be.”

In April, Ingram and dozens of other denominational leaders met in Dallas for a meeting convened by Adam Hamilton, an Oral Roberts University graduate who is pastor of the UMC’s 22,000-member Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas.

Ingram has also had discussions with the UMC’s Western jurisdiction, which is made up of churches west of the Mississippi River.

“I fully expect that, in the months prior to the May 2020 General Conference, we will have some clear idea of where we’re going to go as a church. At least I hope we don’t have to re-litigate everything.”

Grief and hope

Rev. Lindemood, the fifth generation Methodist pastor, expressed his shock over the February vote in a March 8 pastoral letter published on the Sunrise United Methodist Church website.

“I am shocked and in grief by the actions of the denomination to strengthen the stance to isolate LGBTQ individuals and families,” he wrote.

“Open hearts, open minds, open doors’ has been the motto for the United Methodist Church for many years. The decision made in St. Louis reflects a desire to close hearts, minds, and doors to LGBTQ people.

“As a man of faith and a pastor I want to represent a church that reflects the Lord’s unconditional love for all people. All means all. All includes those of us who disagree.”



“I’m encouraging myself and my colleagues as we struggle with what is next,” he said. “Now we get to deal with the best part of our faith, our resurrection faith, knowing that beyond this loss, something new will emerge.”

