

## *Protagonists Corner*

### *What the Heck Is Going On in the United Methodist Church?*

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I was startled when the editors of *Journal for Preachers* asked me to write, in this issue honoring retiring editor Erskine Clarke, about what's happening among the Methodists. "As an American church historian," the editors said, "Erskine is curious about the changes happening among Methodists." Who knew Erskine cared about Methodists?

At the risk of giving Erskine more reasons to be a Presby, here goes. After some turbulent years, for the first time in a long time, the United Methodist denomination, distinguished in the last century for its mergers, is splitting. Presbyterians have good reason to be baffled that some Methodists—always eager ecumenicists with everybody from the Assemblies of God to Roman Catholics—say they can no longer talk to their fellow Methodists. Though the creation of the breakaway Global Methodist Church has begun with a whimper rather than a bang, and the number of secessionists will be limited (the property of each UMC church is held in trust by the denomination, not the congregation), I grieve that a number of our elders have decided that God has not enabled them to keep their ordination vows.

There are legitimate criticisms of the United Methodist Church. If you don't have a list of what's wrong with the UMC, I'll loan you mine. In three books I have hammered the UMC for its screw ups and infidelities—expensive bureaucracy, a couple of errant bishops, creeping Calvinism (sorry, Erskine), virtue signaling, legalistic polity, one trick pony politics. I could go on. And yet, none of those problems can be solved by votes of the UMC General Conference or by separating from the UMC, and none are legitimate reasons to divide the UMC.

Like Erskine, most Methodists are clueless about the *Book of Discipline*, can't name their bishop, and have never run across a real-live member of General Conference. In their unconcern for Methodism beyond their congregation, I think they've got things in proper perspective.

Surely you, Erskine, a distinguished church historian, will agree that the historic genius of Methodist polity is that it's mission driven. Pastors are sent (not called, as in your clan) to lead a congregation's God-given mission.

Although I have little hope that Erskine will buy, much less plow through, my new book *Don't Look Back*, it's the fruit of my interviews and listening sessions with hundreds of United Methodist clergy and laity. None threatened to leave due to dissatisfaction with their pastor or congregation, making it all the more sad that they are departing denominational United Methodism which

1. trained and sent them their pastor,
2. has little to do with the success or demise of their congregation,
3. is irrelevant to their encounters with Christ in church or out, and
4. contributes little to and forbids nothing from their taking responsibility for the mission that Christ has assigned to their congregation.

I'm pleading for Methodists to turn from preoccupation with the general church and denominational legislative mess and back to their Annual Conference and local congregation. The core of the Methodist movement—predating the creation of our dysfunctional General Conference—is a connection of elders in conference with one another, deployed to lead the mission of local churches through word, sacrament, and order, by appointing bishops.

Fragmentation distracts Methodists from deeper, long-term issues that are more determinative of our future than our divisions. Our median age is nearly 65. Even if breakaway Global Methodists (They say they're big on "biblical authority." But "Global" is not a Bible word.) purloin half a million United Methodists, that is less than the Lord will take home from us in the same period of time.

As guest preacher in a rural church (attendance 35, median age near mine), I asked the lay leaders, "What's your greatest challenge as a congregation?" "The United Methodist Church," replied the matriarch. "How so?" I asked. "When those Methodists out west somewhere ordained [sic] that lesbian bishop, they made it hard to stay in this church," she replied. Get my drift?

My theory is that we are choosing up sides and engaging in schism because divorce is easier than figuring out how to reach a new generation of Wesleyans. I'm telling congregations to ignore denominational squabbles, take a hopeful look at your congregation, focus upon the mission that God has entrusted to your church. Flip Wesley's "the world is my parish" to "my parish is our neighborhood."

Sad to see the UMC dividing on the basis of the self-designations "traditionalist" (me-love-Bible-better-than-you) and "progressive" (me Californian, 2022, standing at the summit of human development), merely mirroring the political divides among white voters. Rather than ask the missional "What's Christ up to our neighborhood?" claim the more culturally acceptable "I refuse to be part of a church that doesn't reflect my values before I came to church."

GMC apologists are eager not to be perceived as bolting because of a single contemporary social issue. Paragraph #405, 2 of their "Draft Transitional Book of Discipline" (Law-over-gospel Methodists devise a book of rules prior to founding a church), the first "Basic Qualifications of the Ordained" is "fidelity in Christian marriage between one man and one woman, chastity in singleness," before "knowledge and love of God" or "Have a call by God and the people of God." Erskine surely would ask, "*Really, GMC?*"

In eight years as a bishop, never once did a congregation say that the most desired characteristic in their pastor was “marriage between one man and one woman.” GMC, you’ve come a long way from Bishop Asbury’s prohibition of married circuit riders, which is fine by me. But aren’t you setting the clergy competence bar a bit low?

GMC advocates charge that the UMC has sold out to contemporary culture. But who told the GMC that same-sex sin (their one issue that’s not the only issue) was the chief sin in the UMC or that the UMC is unredeemable? Not the Bible. Not Jesus (who makes not even a cameo appearance in most of these debates on the one issue that’s not really the one issue). It’s inconceivable that the GMC would mount these arguments in any other cultural moment than the present when we white folks are uncomfortable with the culture’s racial reckoning and gender issues debating. Who’s being culturally conforming now?

Our UMC divisions show how current political allegiances and media silos led us to abandon our vocation to be salt and light to the world. (If I can’t shout you into silence, I’ll lock myself into that gated community of buddies who think as I do and call that *ecclesia*—simplistic North American political polarities to overcome biblically authorized identity.) Confusing the Kingdom of God with the USA, we lost the ability to differentiate between a thinking, caring American and a called, witnessing Christian.

Denominationalism has had its day. No new denomination addresses the decline that plagues United Methodism; any new church must struggle with aging, graying, children of various sexual orientations, abortions, racism, but most of all a culture for whom church, any church, is optional. So the GMC’s big idea to set right what’s wrong with the UMC is to form another denomination that will end debate on the single issue that’s not the one issue? I often hear, “I want a church where some things are fixed and final without debate.” Dream on. If Saint Paul couldn’t figure out how to plant such a church, you can’t either.

As a preacher, I know the frustration of being unable to talk others into my position on some important subject, even though I back up my sermons with scripture, a winning personality, and rhetorical flourish, all in twenty minutes. So I empathize with GMC anguish that after decades of debate and voting at General Conference, there are still some Methodists running loose muttering “I see it differently.” Sure, I’ve tried to excommunicate or at least arm wrestle my congregation into submission. Alas, Jesus doesn’t work that way; yet unlike you, he never walked away from an argument or refused to be in conversation with even the most thick headed opponents.

Here’s how my conversations have gone with GMC gurus: “We don’t like....” *Neither do I.* “I’m tired of people not taking scripture seriously in regard to....” *Right on.* “That bishop wouldn’t know Chalcedonian Christology if it bit him in the behind....” *Amen!* “The UMC *Book of Discipline* is a legalistic mess.” *Like I’ve been saying for years.* “Therefore, we’re leaving.” *What?!*

That the GMC has found so little in the UMC to reform gives credence to those who suspect that—in spite of vehement denials—the GMC is being birthed in response to one contemporary social issue.

Why doesn't the GMC Draft Discipline explain why they're taking the drastic step of leaving one church to form another just because the church is full of people who are (as they see it) wrong?

I've got friends who say "Let 'em go. We'll be a better church after the right wingers leave." No, the UMC will be weaker: loss of financial resources along with some of our dearest, most vital congregations, and a few of our most creative, entrepreneurial pastors. "Progressives" will also lose some of their most adept, doggedly persistent, Bible-loving interlocutors, leaving them stuck in a denominational echo chamber with an even higher percentage of people who think just like they do.

I've learned much from my debates with dissidents. Please don't abandon me to my theological blind spots and the clutch of goofy liberals in my congregation! Though you are wrong in your belief that you love scripture more than I, some of your pompous, painful, pretentious criticism of my theological views and our church is, worst of all, *true!*

Dante put schismatics all the way down next door to Satan in the eighth circle of *The Inferno* (below heretics at circle six, I gratefully note). While Dante wasn't a Methodist, still, Globalist Methodists, think twice before you walk.

Erskine, got any other questions?

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