

Human Sexuality and Our Future in the UMC

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Introduction

One of our members asked me to offer my thoughts on the future of the First United Methodist Church of Florence as a congregation in the United Methodist Church, especially as it relates to the denomination's stance and any future stance on human sexuality. This task is complicated because so many layers intersect in complex ways. One complication is that while some things are known, others remain unknown. We can't predict the future. Since this issue arose over 50 years ago, people's understanding of human sexuality has changed, and our understanding will continue to evolve and develop. Faithful followers of Jesus Christ must constantly wrestle with the challenges of an ever-changing world, so this issue, among others, will continually push us into uncomfortable conversations.

I am also aware that for many families in our church, the conflict over human sexuality is not merely an issue to be resolved – it's about what the church says about how God views their daughters, sons, sisters, brothers, granddaughters, and grandsons.

I know some will argue that the issue of human sexuality is simple and straightforward. Yet, for those who have studied the scriptures with theological integrity and examined the topic with a desire to understand those who see things differently, we find that simple answers are incomplete at best and arrogantly dismissive at worst. Others fear challenging their long-held beliefs, thinking it's a slippery slope that might eventually rob them of their faith, so they are unwilling to entertain new ideas or perspectives.

As we discern our future in the UMC, I invite you to set aside any preconceived ideas and consider that your perspective could be wrong. I am willing to do the same. Being open to new ideas does not require abandoning your convictions; it's an opportunity to challenge your assumptions. If your beliefs withstand scrutiny, you're on solid ground; however, an unwillingness to thoroughly examine what and why you believe what you do denies you the chance to grow in your faith.

I am utilizing a visual framework of five concentric circles to help us understand the different levels of this dilemma. These five circles represent the five key questions we need to address. The innermost circle represents the core question we must answer before considering anything else. The remaining four questions emanate from the center and add to our understanding of the issue before us:

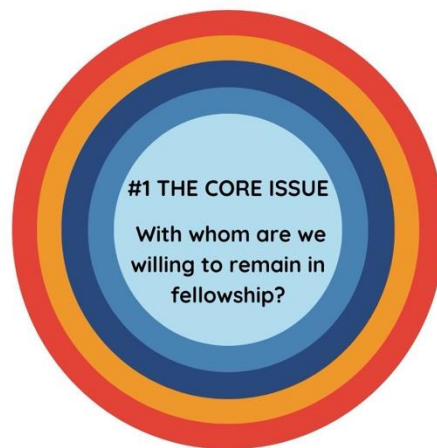
Fig. 1.1



These five questions will guide our dialogue and, hopefully, help us sustain our unity as we continue to worship together as a United Methodist congregation.

Circle #1 (The Core Issue)
“With Whom Are We Willing to Remain in Fellowship?”

Fig. 1.2



I have never served a congregation where everyone agreed on everything, yet agreement is not necessary for unity. The Holy Spirit inspires unity as we share in the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Every other issue is secondary to the essential focus on helping people discover an ever-deepening relationship with Jesus Christ. Some elevate opposition to homosexuality as

a litmus test for faithfulness, while others use radical inclusiveness as the standard. Both extremes fail to acknowledge a continuum between these opposite positions where faithful people fall. For instance, some people support civil rights for gay and lesbian people but disapprove of same-sex marriages on religious grounds. Absolutist views always exclude those in the middle.

Currently, the UMC's official position is that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, and no person who is a self-avowed practicing homosexual qualifies for ordination as a clergyperson. The UMC Book of Discipline (*the book containing our organizational rules*) also states that no clergyperson in the UMC can perform same-sex marriages or unions. This position cannot change until the General Conference meets in April-May 2024. Having participated as a delegate to previous General Conferences, I know NO ONE can predict what changes will occur. Any attempt to define outcomes at this point is pure speculation.

While many people in our congregation support the current position of the UMC on homosexuality, others disagree with it. Those who disagree are willing to submit to the authority of the UMC's stance and abide by the Book of Discipline. They remain in fellowship because they love our church and its people. This commitment to unity doesn't mean they must agree with the official position; however, they are willing to submit to the authority of the denomination and live within its laws. They do so because they love those they disagree with and remain committed to keeping their membership vows as established in the Book of Discipline of the UMC.

Others in our congregation who favor the current UMC position are unwilling to wait and see what the General Conference decides in 2024. They want to leave the UMC now to become part of a church/denomination that will not allow any perspective on human sexuality other than theirs. They prefer a new setting that will formally disqualify participation in leadership by anyone who disagrees with their position. Essentially, they have already chosen NOT to be in fellowship with those with whom they disagree and are demanding that FUMC disaffiliate immediately.

Tom Lambrecht, Good News Magazine Vice President & General Manager, crafted a helpful categorization of where people fall in the UMC utilizing a non-binary scale. He credits this conceptual framework to Bishop Judith Craig. Tom Berlin, the pastor of Floris UMC in Herndon, Virginia, a centrist/progressive church, has also used Lambrecht's model in teaching about the division in the UMC. The model has four categories instead of just two: *Traditionalist Non-Compatibilist*, *Traditionalist Compatibilist*, *Progressive Compatibilist*, and *Progressive Non-Compatibilist*. I have added a fifth category for *Centrists* because there are Methodists in the middle who are unwilling to declare a position on this matter or are still uncertain about their beliefs about human sexuality.

See the next page for *Figure 1.3 Traditionalist, Centrist, and Progressives*

Figure 1.3 Traditionalists, Centrists, and Progressives. This is an adaptation of a model crafted by Tom Lambrecht (Traditionalist), adopted by Tom Berlin (Progressive), with the addition of Tim Crouch (Centrist), and compiled by me where each position on the diagram utilized words from actual Traditionalists, Centrists, and Progressives to describe their position. It is not fair for others to categorize a position that is not their own, nor to “put words in the mouths” of those with whom we know they disagree. Although some of these authors have speculated about a percentage breakdown in these categories, I have removed those references because we need to decide for ourselves which category describes us.

Traditionalists		Centrists	Progressives	
Non-Compatibilists	Compatibilists	Compatibilists	Compatibilists	Non-Compatibilists
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Believe that the Bible is correct when it teaches that marriage is a God-created relationship between one man and one woman, ideally for life, and sexual relationships are to be reserved for that marriage relationship. <input type="checkbox"/> They believe that to affirm or even allow same-sex marriage or other non-marital sexual relationships would put the church in the position of contradicting the clear teaching of Scripture and abandoning biblical authority “as the true rule and guide for faith and practice” <input type="checkbox"/> To do so would be to violate our Doctrinal Standards. <input type="checkbox"/> For these people, the church’s stance is an essential issue of faith because it directly relates to biblical authority, as well as the doctrines of creation, justification, and sanctification. That is why traditionalist non-compatibilists would be unable to continue in a church that allows same-sex marriage or the ordination of practicing homosexuals.¹ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Share the belief with non-compatibilists that the Bible is correct when it teaches that marriage is a God-created relationship between one man and one woman, and that sexual relationships are to be reserved for marriage. <input type="checkbox"/> However, some would allow that other interpretations of Scripture might be correct. <input type="checkbox"/> In any case, they do not see the church’s stance on this issue as an essential matter of faith, and/or they believe that the good things that the church can do together outweigh the different practices regarding homosexuality. <input type="checkbox"/> If they themselves are not forced to violate their consciences by performing same-sex marriages or receiving a practicing homosexual as pastor, they are willing to allow others in the church to do so.² 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> We believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior <input type="checkbox"/> We believe that scripture is inspired by God <input type="checkbox"/> We believe that the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience helps us to make the Bible relevant to our daily lives <input type="checkbox"/> We believe in a Big Tent Church that allows room for progressives, centrists, and traditionalists. <input type="checkbox"/> We believe that we can live and worship and work with one another despite our differences. <input type="checkbox"/> We believe that the grace of God is sufficient and is available to all <input type="checkbox"/> We believe that we are called to love one another, even amid our disagreements <input type="checkbox"/> We believe that we are called to Make Disciples of Jesus Christ and in making disciples we can transform the world <input type="checkbox"/> We rejoice in reconciliation <input type="checkbox"/> We believe that though we cannot all think alike that we can all love alike <input type="checkbox"/> We believe that diversity in our churches is a gift from God and strengthens our church <input type="checkbox"/> We believe in Wesley’s first General Rule to “Do No Harm”³ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Many of these people have moved from Traditionalist Compatibilists into this area in more recent years. <input type="checkbox"/> They would like to see the church offer ordination to all people and same-sex marriage to committed Christian couples. <input type="checkbox"/> They understand that their friends on the right are not where they are and believe that the unity Christ prayed for the church can be upheld despite this difference. <input type="checkbox"/> They respect the right of their traditionalist friends and do not want them to be forced into situations that would violate their personal beliefs.⁴ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> People in this space have deep concerns for the call of Scripture for justice for all people <input type="checkbox"/> They point to Jesus’ deferential care of the marginalized as a pattern for how the church deals with those considered “outsiders” today. <input type="checkbox"/> These two points of biblical interpretation, among others, lead them to work for full inclusion in the life of the church. <input type="checkbox"/> This is such a high value for them that they only want to be in a church that reflects this belief and will work for change if the church does not.⁵
Likely Will NOT remain in UMC	May remain in the UMC	Will remain in the UMC	May remain in the UMC	Likely Will NOT remain in UMC

Footnotes:

¹ and ² Tom Lambrecht Good News Vice President and General Manager, <https://tomlambrecht.goodnewsmag.org/unpacking-incompatibilists/>

³ Tim Crouch, Layperson, North Texas Annual Conference, <https://mainstreamumc.com/blog/the-wesleyan-character-of-methodist-centrists/>

⁴ and ⁵ Tom Berlin, Senior Pastor at Floris UMC, Herndon, VA, <https://www.pnwumc.org/news/sugar-packets/>

This chart can help identify where you currently stand as you work through the discernment process, and it may also help you understand others with whom you may disagree. As you gain new information in the discernment process, you may shift from one category to another.

Division in the church is hard on everybody. Consider how if FUMC decides to disaffiliate from the UMC over the issue of human sexuality, it sets a precedent for the congregation when other controversial matters arise. New divisions and conflicts will occur—it's inevitable. If splitting is an option now, what will it take until the church feels the need to split again?

In 2019, the Council of Bishops presented the "*One Church Plan*" to the called session of the General Conference of the UMC. This plan would have allowed each local United Methodist congregation to decide whether to let same-sex marriages occur in their facilities. The Council of Bishops' plan also gave each clergy person permission to follow their conscience regarding presiding over same-sex marriages. If a congregation voted to disallow same-sex marriages, regardless of the position of the clergy person, the congregation's conscience would prevail, and no same-sex marriages would occur in their facility. If a clergy person did not approve of same-sex marriages, no one could compel the clergy person to act against their conscience.

The One Church Plan was a reasonable way to honor the theological convictions of local churches and pastors; however, the Traditionalist Non-Compatibilists (*identified in the previous chart*) at General Conference voted down the Council of Bishops' proposal. In its place, they presented the *Traditional Plan* that enacted even more restrictive legislation toward homosexual persons in the church and those who support them.

While the Traditionalist Non-Compatibilist delegates prevailed at the 2019 General Conference, the number of U.S. delegates aligned with their position is smaller for the next General Conference. Even though the Book of Discipline currently contains a Traditionalist stance on human sexuality, Traditionalists have preemptively decided to leave the UMC because they anticipate a change in the UMC's position at the 2024 General Conference.

The disaffiliation process available for churches to use (§2553 in the *Book of Discipline*) was supported by Traditionalists, hoping, at the time it passed, that those who favor a more progressive stance would leave the denomination. Any inference now by Traditionalists that the process is unfair feels hollow, given that it was their version of §2553 that passed. Only a few Progressive Non-Compatibilist congregations in other parts of the U.S. have utilized §2553 to disaffiliate.

I don't want anybody to leave FUMC-Florence or the UMC. I envision a church where we work together for the Kingdom of God, not because we agree on everything but

because we love one another and refuse to let our disagreements define with whom we are willing to remain in fellowship in our congregation. Conflict is uncomfortable; however, if what we believe can't be debated with other faithful UMC Christians who see things differently, how deep and genuine is our belief?

Occasionally, couples with difficulty in their marriages come to me for counseling. One of the most challenging aspects of marital counseling is when one of the spouses has already determined they want a divorce. In effect, they have already left the marriage. It's hard to deal with the issues contributing to the difficulty in the relationship when one of the spouses has already decided the relationship won't work for them, and they're unwilling to try to make it work.

This scenario is descriptive of what has happened at our church. A group of people in the congregation who are unhappy with the UMC decided they want to leave the denomination. They did not give our church a chance to discuss the issues together before demanding disaffiliation (divorce). Now, in the discernment process, we're faced with the messy task of working with partners who have no interest in preserving the relationship.

So, it all comes down to the core question, *"With whom are we willing to remain in fellowship?"* If we all must agree on everything to remain together in the UMC, we've already made a choice that cuts us off from those with whom we disagree. Yet, if we are willing to interact, support, and share ministry with people we disagree with, we can all remain in the UMC and work out our differences in ways that honor God and each other.