



LGBTQ Pride flags decorating the railings of Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington DC, by Elvert Barnes, Flickr Creative Commons: <http://bit.ly/2sl8J07>

Note on this Case Study:

When considering this case study, remember that every major world religion originated and has grown in patriarchal societies—that is, societies where men hold most of the culture’s power, and people of any other gender are largely excluded from power. In this patriarchal context, religions have responded in very different ways, sometimes upholding and supporting misogyny, and sometimes subverting and rejecting it in favor of gender equality. Powerful women, feminists, and members of the LGBTQ community have played major roles in all faith traditions, in diverse ways across different times and cultures.

As always, when thinking about religion and gender, maintain a focus on how religion is internally diverse, always evolving and changing, and embedded in specific cultures.

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Sexuality and the United Methodists

In recent years, Christian churches have taken strikingly divergent views on sexuality. Some, such as the Catholic, Orthodox, and many Evangelical churches, have taken explicit institutional stances against LGBTQ inclusion.¹ Others, like the Episcopalians, Presbyterians (PCUSA), and Lutherans (ELCA) have taken explicit stances in support of LGBTQ inclusion.² Of course, individual members of these institutions will have diverse views on the topic, and the stance of an institution does not always reflect the stance of an individual member; The United Method Church (UMC) is a perfect example of this complexity.

The UMC is a global Protestant denomination which has significant membership in North America, Africa, Europe, and Asia. While historically originating in the United Kingdom, the largest population of Methodists now lives in the United States, where it is the third largest religious group after Catholics and Baptists.³

Every four years, the UMC meets at what they call the Methodist General Conference—a democratic body of representatives from across the world which gathers to make church decisions. In 1972, the Conference voted to add language to the church’s law, stating “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching,” and that gay ministers and marriages are not allowed in their churches.⁴

Even then, this stance was controversial, and the issue has been taken up again by every General Conference since.⁵ While the UMC position against LGBTQ inclusion has not changed, significant numbers of clergy and lay people have protested these church policies. UMC pastor Sanford Brown of Seattle called the church’s anti-gay position “wrong, stupid, and evil.”⁶ In 1999, minister Jimmy Creech performed the first Methodist same-sex marriage ceremony and was subsequently defrocked by the UMC—or deprived of his status as a member of the clergy.

¹ “Faith Positions,” *Human Rights Campaign*, Accessed June 17, 2017. <http://www.hrc.org/resources/faith-positions>

² Laurie Goodstein, “United Methodist Church to Reassess Rules on Gays and Marriage,” *The New York Times*, (New York, NY), May 18, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/19/us/united-methodist-church-to-reassess-rules-on-gays-and-marriage.html>; Laurie Goodstein, “Methodist High Court Rejects First Openly Gay Bishop’s Consecration,” *The New York Times*, (New York, NY), April 28, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/28/us/methodist-high-court-rejects-first-gay-bishops-consecration.html>

³ Goodstein, “Methodist High Court,” 2017.

⁴ “What is the denomination’s position on homosexuality?” *The United Methodist Church*, 2016. <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/what-is-the-denominations-position-on-homosexuality>

⁵ Goodstein, “Methodist High Court,” 2017.

⁶ Tim Haeck, “Seattle pastor calls church policy on homosexuality, “evil, stupid,” *My Northwest* (Seattle, WA), May 8, 2012. <http://mynorthwest.com/35650/seattle-pastor-calls-church-policy-on-homosexuality-evil-stupid/>

Many other pastors followed Creech's lead, including Franklyn Schaefer, who was famously defrocked by the church in 2013 after he presided over the marriage of his gay son. Schaefer was reinstated in 2014 after being disciplined.⁷

In addition to speaking out and performing gay marriage ceremonies, many ministers of the UMC have come out as LGBTQ in recent decades. In the lead up to the 2016 General Conference, over 150 American Methodist ministers had come out as gay. Also in 2016, the UMC elected its first openly gay bishop when Karen Oliveto was elected bishop in the Western Jurisdiction.⁸ In June of 2017, the UMC appointed its first transgender deacon in Illinois.⁹

However, many in the UMC continue to support the church's current policies and have demanded that the church crack down on members who resist the denomination's anti-LGBTQ stance. For example, Rob Renfroe, head of the conservative "Good News" group of the UMC, stated that the election of Bishop Oliveto was a "crisis" and called on Methodists to "denounce this schismatic action," and force her resignation.¹⁰ In the spring of 2017, the UMC's Judicial Council—the supreme court of the UMC—ruled that Bishop Oliveto's election violated church law, though a final sentence was yet to be set pending further proceedings.¹¹

Changes to the church's policies have consistently been voted down by the global General Conference, with the delegates largely split along geographic and cultural lines. While a majority of American Methodists prefer to recognize same-sex clergy and marriages, conservative American Methodists have been joined by African and Asian Methodists who generally oppose LGBTQ recognition.¹² The growing population of Methodists in Africa and Asia, coupled with the declining population of Methodists in the United States, have caused some to predict that church policies will be difficult if not impossible to change.¹³

Issues of sexuality came to a head at the UMC General Conference of 2016, when some of the representatives to the Conference—nearly all of whom were American—presented over 100 proposed changes to the rules on sexuality.¹⁴ However, when leaks on social media exposed that bishops at the highest level were discussing splitting the church for good over these issues, an emergency measure was narrowly passed 428-405, to table all discussion of sexuality in 2016, and empower the bishops of the UMC to appoint a commission to explore LGBTQ church policies. Conservatives were angered by the vote which LGBTQ Methodists and their allies cheered as a means to buy more time since it seemed clear that the proposed changes would have been voted down again.¹⁵ The commission has been scheduled to present its recommendation at a special session of the UMC General Conference in 2019.¹⁶ Still, few expect the church's many disagreements over sexuality to be resolved by this commission.

⁷ Laurie Goodstein, "Defrocking of Minister Widens Split Over Gays," *The New York Times*, (New York, NY), Dec. 19, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/20/us/methodist-pastor-defrocked-over-gay-marriage-service.html>

⁸ Goodstein, "Methodist High Court," 2017.

⁹ Julie Zauzmer, "The United Methodist Church has appointed a transgender deacon," *The Washington Post*, (Washington, DC), June 7, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/06/07/the-united-methodist-church-just-appointed-a-transgender-deacon/?utm_term=.5ca76b067bef

¹⁰ Rob Renfroe, "Rev. Rob Renfroe Responds to Election of Openly Gay Bishop," *Good News*, 2016, Online Video.

¹¹ Goodstein, "Methodist High Court," 2017.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, "Methodists Won't Vote on Gay Marriage This Year After All," *Christianity Today*, (Carol Stream, IL), May 19, 2016. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/may/how-us-african-methodists-vote-homosexuality-umc-umcgc-2016.html>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Goodstein, "United Methodist Church to Reassess Rules," 2016.

¹⁶ Goodstein, "Methodist High Court," 2017.

Additional Resources

Primary Sources:

- UMC pastor excluded from worship over LGBTQ issues (2016): <http://bit.ly/2sEiBYN>
- The Western Jurisdiction of the UMC explains why they voted for an openly gay bishop (2017): <http://bit.ly/2rvGRNf>
- Conservative leader of the “Good News” organization in the UMC speaks out against openly gay bishop (2016): <http://bit.ly/2rAQOnq>
- Pro-LGBTQ inclusion group Reconciling Ministries Network on reaching out to African Methodists in the UMC (2017): <http://bit.ly/2rB5lj6>

Secondary Sources:

- PBS video news story on “Methodist Gay Marriage”: <http://to.pbs.org/1dYdWCc>
- PBS Documentary on sexuality in the UMC: <http://to.pbs.org/2sEgggE>
- NYT on the UMC’s defrocking of Franklyn Schaefer: <http://nyti.ms/2rpi9tw>
- NYT on the Judicial Council’s ruling against Bishop Oliveto: <http://nyti.ms/2qn18jM>
- WP on the UMC’s first transgender deacon: <http://wapo.st/2tbCRhK>

Discussion Questions

- How would you respond to a friend who told you, “Christianity is anti-gay” or “Christianity is pro-gay,” based on this case study?
- What does this case study say about the idea that religions are “internally diverse” in terms of Christianity as a whole, and in terms of specific denominations or sects within Christianity?
- Watch the primary source videos above, particularly the videos from the Western Jurisdiction and the Good News organization. How do these people of faith justify their divergent views? What about their context and faith may lead them to hold these views?
- While church policies have remained consistent, how do you see religion changing over time in this case study?
- How do you see religion being embedded in culture in this case study?
- Why might African and Asian Methodists largely vote against LGBTQ inclusion? Why might American Methodists be so divided?
- Watch the Reconciling Ministries Network video above. How do the Africans in this video complicate the idea that African Methodists generally vote against LGBTQ inclusion?



Rev. Franklyn Schaefer, UMC minister who was defrocked for presiding at the marriage of his gay son in 2007, by Bkarin, Wikimedia Commons: <http://bit.ly/2tulsIE>