



John Wesley's Catholic Spirit and United Methodist Schism

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Abstract: This paper argues that the inability of the United Methodist Church to live together with difference over human sexuality, represents the failure of twenty-first century Methodists to live out of John Wesley's catholic spirit. In elevating views on human sexuality to a church-dividing principle, the Gospel as a revelation of God's reconciling work for the world, has been displaced from the centre of Methodist discourse, an action that will result in exclusionary harm for LGBTQI+ Methodists. Queer holiness is real and a recognition of this is necessary for the fully affirming Methodism of the future.

Keywords: Sexuality • Holiness • United Methodism Schism • Queer Theology • LGBTQI+

Introduction

The Methodist-Roman Catholic Theological Commission met in Rome in October 2022, to commence a new round of dialogue. As a Methodist member of the Commission, I was struck by the challenge of explaining to Catholic members the sheer number of different Methodist churches in existence. The eighty Methodist, Holiness, Uniting, and United churches that make up the membership of the World Methodist Council does not contain anywhere near all the world's Methodists. From 1 May 2022 we have had to take account of one further. The Global Methodist Church was launched after The United Methodist Church (responding to COVID conditions) postponed its 2022 General Conference which was to consider *The Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation*. This Protocol would have allowed an amicable separation of those traditionalists in the denomination who desired to exit the UMC because of its unwillingness to enforce its own official position that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching."¹ This position was reinforced at the 2019 General Conference, in spite of strong progressive voices against it. On May 3, 2024, the United Methodist General Conference, meeting in Charlotte, North Carolina, lifted the ban on Queer clergy and same sex marriages in the Church.²

This approach allows liberty of conscience at the local level, and is an attempt to keep progressives, centrists, and traditionalists in the same tent. It is essentially the same approach as that taken in the Uniting Church in Australia at its 15th Assembly in 2018. This decision was made possible only after around a quarter of United

¹ *Book of Discipline United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: United Methodist Church, 2016), para 304.3.

² See Heather Hann, 'United Methodists Remove Same Sex Wedding Ban,' *United Methodist News Service* available at <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/united-methodists-remove-same-sex-wedding-ban> (Accessed X)

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Methodist congregations with a more traditional stance had disaffiliated. Some of these became part of the GMC. Others joined smaller Methodist churches such as The Free Methodist Church and The Wesleyan Church. A few simply became independent. Learning to live together with difference has been a challenge for the church since New Testament times, and compromise solutions such as this will leave some more radical Methodists unhappy at both ends of the debate. The UMC will probably now be better equipped for its mission as a result of having resolved an internal division that has torn it apart for decades, freeing it up to direct its energies in a more outward direction.

These events represent the most significant Methodist schism since the 1845 division within the Methodist Episcopal Church over slavery. Where the nineteenth century was a century of Methodist division, the twentieth century was the ecumenical century, in which Methodists made significant achievements, both in healing their own divisions and merging with other Protestant denominations to form new Uniting and United churches. Such unions were possible primarily because the disputes separating the various Methodist churches from each other were not primarily theological in nature, but largely focused on differences in church government which had grown less pronounced over time. In the case of Methodist unions with other Protestant churches, while there remained theological differences to negotiate, the theological value of unity was deemed to be of greater importance than other matters. United Methodist schism runs in a contrary direction and may presage a new era of Methodist division.

Disputes over sexuality have exercised Methodist, Uniting and United churches in other parts of the world, including in Australia and New Zealand where fault lines developed that led in some cases to division and in other cases to compromise solutions. In 2000, the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Aotearoa New Zealand was formed after Methodists could no longer hold together their divergent views on sexuality. From the late 1990s, members of AFFIRM (Methodist Action for Faith Fellowship Intercession Renewal and Mission) had attempted to apply Wesley's 'think and let think' approach to find a way for evangelicals and liberals to coexist in New Zealand Methodism. More radical voices on both sides of the debate resulted in the 2000 schism, which is seen by some as a sign of renewal and by others as a tragic wound to the body of Christ. Both the more radical and liberationist perspectives of Te Haahi Weteriana O Aotearoa (The Methodist Church) and the more evangelical tradition represented by the Wesleyan Methodists explicitly appeal to John Wesley for their emphases, and both carry the pain of division.

The Uniting Church in Australia (the result of a 1977 merger between Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists) pledges in Paragraph 10 of its Basis of Union to "listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his Forty-Four Sermons (1973)" and commits its ministers and instructors to "study these statements, so that the congregation of Christ's people may again and again be reminded of the grace which justifies them through faith, of the centrality of the person and work of Christ the justifier, and of the need for a constant appeal to Holy Scripture."³ As it has done this, the Uniting Church has found itself deeply divided over LGBTQI+ inclusion but managed to avoid a schism when at its 15th Assembly in July 2018, it agreed that its members held two different doctrines of marriage and allowed for a 'local option' on the solemnization of same sex marriages.⁴

This paper argues that the inability of the United Methodist Church to live together with difference over human sexuality represents the failure of twenty-first century Methodists to live out of John Wesley's catholic spirit. The formation of the GMC has been mirrored on the progressive end by the creation of The Liberation Methodist Connexion in November 2020, evidencing the same failure.⁵ This paper argues that as a result of the UMC's failure to apply Wesley's ideal of a Catholic spirit, and in elevating views on human sexuality to a church dividing principle, the Gospel as a revelation of God's reconciling work for the world has been displaced from the centre of United Methodist discourse, an action that will result in exclusionary harm for LGBTQI+ Methodists. To make this case I will first examine the intellectual foundations of Methodism and of Wesley's 'catholic' spirit, before exploring the theological diversity of the UMC and the Global Church before concluding.

³ *The Basis of Union 1992 Edition* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 2003), paragraph 10, pp. 9-10.

⁴ Zalika Rizmal, 'Uniting Church Allows Ministers to Conduct Same-sex Marriage Ceremonies in Australia,' *ABC News*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-15/same-sex-marriage-uniting-church-gives-ministers-right-to-decide/9995602> July 15, 2018.

⁵ *Liberation Methodist Connexion* <https://www.thelmex.org/>

Methodist Origins

Methodism's origins as an eighteenth-century religious society are closely associated with the Church of England, but also greatly influenced in doctrine and structures by European Pietism. One of the hallmarks of Pietism was a preference for a simple biblical faith in preference to more complex doctrinal formulas, one result of which was an ecumenical outlook.⁶ Where Christ was recognised in a fellow believer, and where love prevailed, there existed a basis for shared mission, even where doctrinal differences existed. It is not at all the case that John Wesley was uninterested in doctrine, or that he never indulged in doctrinal controversies. Indeed, his own theology was Trinitarian, orthodox, and fully in keeping with the doctrinal formularies of the Church of England. He was not slow to identify what he considered theological errors among Anglicans, Moravians, Methodists, and others. The fact that he wrote a letter asking "whether there is any difference between Quakerism and Christianity" and answered, "I think there is," indicates that he could sometimes draw sharp boundaries. Wesley does not deny that there are Quakers who are Christians but insists that Quakerism itself is not compatible with Christianity.⁷ While he drew heavily from the Catholic mystical tradition, and could be warm toward individual Catholics, he considered the Catholic Church a false religion and many of its doctrines to be in error.⁸ His staunch opposition to Calvinism is well known.⁹

And yet, none of Wesley's preachers was ever placed on trial for heresy. No one was ever evicted from the Society for holding Calvinistic views, though some were evicted for acts of gross immorality. Certainly, Wesley "enforced the discipline", but this primarily meant ensuring that Methodists kept to the classes and bands, and that preachers went where the Conference appointed and kept the 'Rules of a Helper', the basic regulations set for them by Wesley. He offered clear teaching to combat what he believed were theological errors, but he looked for the "humble, patient, love of God" in his fellow Methodists regardless of their opinions. Where he found it, he offered the right hand of fellowship, declaring, "though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt we may".¹⁰

Some eighteenth-century Methodist preachers were removed for "unspeakable acts," and it does not take much reading between the lines to conclude that some of these were same sex offences which were judged according to the standards of eighteenth-century views of sexuality.¹¹ It is clear that Wesley shared the abhorrence of "sodomy" (an indeterminate term that could refer to a wide range of sexual deviance) that was common among the clergy of his day. In his *Word in Season: Or Advice to an Englishman* written in 1745, he included it, along with the effeminacy of the English gentry, as among the reasons given for God having allowed the Jacobite invasion of that year.¹² Frederick II of Prussia was the worst "fiend incarnate" that had ever been. "Surely so unnatural a brute never disgraced a throne before [...] A monster that made it a fixed rule that no woman and no priest enter his palace, and that not only gloried in the constant practice of sodomy himself, but made it free for all his subjects!

⁶ Roger Olsen and Christian T. Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism: Retrieving an Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 99.

⁷ John Wesley, "A Letter to a Person Lately Joined with the People Called Quakers", in *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 14, Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, eds. Sarah Lancaster, Randy L. Maddox and Kelly Diehl Yates (Nashville: Abingdon, 2022), 308 (308–320).

⁸ Glen O'Brien, "'I Wish Them Well but I Dare Not Trust Them': John Wesley's Anti-Catholicism in Context," *Journal of Religious History* 45:2 (June 2021): 185–210.

⁹ Wesley's anti-Calvinist writings include *A Dialogue Between a Predestinarian and His Friend* (1741), *Serious Thoughts upon the Perseverance of the Saints* (1751), *Predestination Calmly Considered* (1752), *Thoughts on the Imputed Righteousness of Christ* (1762), *The Question "What is an Arminian?" Answered* (1770), *The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination* (1770), *Thoughts upon Necessity* (1774), and *Thoughts upon God's Sovereignty* (1777).

These are all included, along with many others, in "Section II, Treatises Related to Controversy over Calvinistic Emphases," in *The Works of John Wesley, vol. 13, Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, eds. Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013), 201–570.

¹⁰ John Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," in *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 2: Sermons II* (34–70), edited by Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 82.

¹¹ John Lenton, "Men Who Left the Wesleyan Methodist Ministry, 1791–1932: A Database in Progress," in D.J. Hart and D.J. Jeremy (eds), *Brands Plucked from the Burning: Essays on Methodist Memorialisation and Remembering* (Evesham: Wesley Historical Society, 2014), 168–96. For a helpful historical survey, see William Gibson and Joanne Begiato, "The Church, Sodomy, and Same Sex Desires", in William Gibson and Joanne Begiato (eds), *Sex and the Church in the Long Eighteenth Century: Religion, Enlightenment and the Sexual Revolution* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 195–230. See also, Peter S. Forsaith, "...too indelicate to mention...": Transgressive Male Sexualities in Early Methodism," *Methodist Review* 12 (2020) 61–84, and Glen O'Brien, "'A Divine Attraction between Your Soul and Mine': George Whitefield and Same Sex Affection in eighteenth-century Methodism," *Pacifica* 30:2 (2017): 177–192.

¹² John Wesley, *A Word in Season: Or Advice to an Englishman* (London: 1745), 3–4.

What a pity that his father had not beheaded him in his youth and saved him from all this sin and shame".¹³ For all this in principle opposition, Wesley showed remarkable compassion and offered practical support to Thomas Blair who was incarcerated in the Bocardo prison, Oxford, on charges of "sodomy". He raised concerns with the Vice-Chancellor of the University about the inhumane treatment of Blair, visited Blair in prison, and helped him prepare his defence at trial.¹⁴ Decades after this incident, in 1778, Wesley was still being ridiculed in satirical literature for his support of Blair. "With Tears you cleans'd Bocardo from all Sin / And Lodg'd in Stews to lay the fiend within".¹⁵

Very little information is available about Blair, and we do not know the precise motives for Wesley's concern, but it may be that, in this instance, the widely-held cultural aversion to same sex practices was overcome by a higher value – compassion for a neighbour in need. The intervening centuries have seen a growth in the clinical understanding of sexuality, as well as in interpretive approaches to scripture, enabling a shift in attitude. There is a growing consensus that the Old Testament texts prohibiting same sex activity belong to a no longer binding set of ceremonial laws. The view that the relevant New Testament prohibitions relate to exploitative relationships between men and boys, especially in the context of ritual temple prostitution, and not to sexual orientation as we understand it today, are becoming increasingly adopted.¹⁶ The principle of love toward those who are poorly treated, modelled by Wesley toward Blair, has remained as important as ever.

John Wesley's 'Catholic Spirit'

Clearly Methodists are today deeply divided in their opinion about the status and role of Queer Christians in the church. Efforts to narrow such disagreement are important for the unity of the church, but more importantly for the sake of those caught in the pincers of such disagreement. Wesley's method of resolving disputes among believers can help us. American twentieth-century theologian Albert Outler referred to Wesley's 1755 sermon on a Catholic Spirit as the "most formal articulation" of Wesley's "non-dogmatic method in theology."¹⁷ This method was "to narrow the field of irreducible disagreement between professing, practicing Christians and to transfer their concerns from arguments about faith in Christ to faith itself and to its consequences." Wesley sought clarity on the essentials of the faith and liberty of opinion on non-essential matters, allowing that Methodists "think and let think." He began by affirming that Christians owe a debt of love to all - not only to their fellow believers, but to all humanity, even their enemies. Differences of opinion and different modes of worship may prevent external union between churches, but this need not prevent a "union in affection". Such differences may exist over a wide range of matters, including church government, orders of ministry, forms of prayer, the mode of receiving Communion, who may receive baptism and by what method (even whether the sacraments should be administered at all), while at the same time retaining oneness of heart with other believers.¹⁸

The bare minimum of Christianity is identified as a belief in the existence of God, and as such a saving trust in Christ as to result in a "faith filled with the energy of love". This is not simply a loving feeling, but a love expressed in deeds – acts of mercy and help toward one's neighbour. Having these things, doctrinal differences can exist without dividing believers.

Wesley makes it clear what his own beliefs are on certain disputed matters but makes it equally clear that he asks no other believer to share those beliefs. He does, however, have some demands:

¹³ John Wesley, Journal, 7 May 1789, *The Works of John Wesley vol. 24 Journals and Diaries VII (1787– 1791)*, edited by W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 132; Journal entry 26 August 1784, *The Works of John Wesley vol. 23 Journals and Diaries VII (1776–1786)*, edited by W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 328–29.

¹⁴ C.L.S. Linnell (ed.), *The Diaries of Thomas Wilson, D.D.*, entry for Wednesday 12 November 1732 (London: SPCK, 1964), 81; V.H.H. Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley* (London: Edward Arnold, 1961), 184–85.

¹⁵ *Perfection, A Poetical Satire* (London: J. Bew, 1778), 8, cited in Gibson and Begiato, "The Church, Sodomy, and Same Sex Desires", 215.

¹⁶ William C. Loader, *Sexuality in the New Testament: The Key Texts*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009. See also Colby Martin, *UnClobber: Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016, and Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships*. New York: Convergent Books, 2015.

¹⁷ Albert C. Outler, in *The Works of John Wesley Volume 2 Sermons (34-70)* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 79.

¹⁸ John Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," in *Works*, vol. 2, 86–87.

"Love me [...] commend me to God in your prayers [...] provoke me to love and to good works [...] love me, not in words only but in deed and in truth. So far as in conscience thou canst (retaining still thy own opinions and thy own manner of worshipping God), join with me in the work of God, and let us go on hand in hand [...] Speak honourably, wherever thou art, of the work of God, by whomsoever he works, and kindly of his messengers. And if it be in thy power, not only sympathize with them, when they are in any difficulty or distress, but give them a cheerful and effectual assistance, that they may glorify God on your behalf".¹⁹

Given this generous spirit, Wesley undertakes to return the favour. Finally, he carefully defines the meaning of the term "catholic spirit". It does not mean "speculative latitudinarianism", in other words an indifference to any and all doctrines as if there were no point engaging in theological debates as and when appropriate. A person who possesses a catholic spirit is *not* one who is "of a muddy understanding" whose "mind is all in a mist" because they have no "settled, consistent principles" and is for "jumbling all opinions together." Such an attitude is closer to the spirit of antichrist than of Christ. Nor is a catholic spirit "practical latitudinarianism," as if any form of worship at all were equally as good as any other. The one who possesses a catholic spirit is fully convinced that their own mode of worship is "scriptural and rational", and cleaves lovingly to their own congregation, only they allow others to think the same of their own mode of worship and equally to love their own congregation. Steadily fixed in one's own religious principles, a catholic spirit allows liberty to one's neighbour to be as steadily fixed in their own. "His heart is enlarged toward all mankind, those he knows and those he does not; he embraces with strong and cordial affection neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies. This is catholic or universal love. And he that has this is of a catholic spirit. For love alone gives the title to this character – catholic love is a catholic spirit."²⁰ The one who keeps steadfastly in this way of living will eventually be "swallowed up in love forever and ever".²¹

It may well be asked, what reason can be given not to include differences of opinion about human sexuality among those non-essential beliefs over which Methodists ought to be able to "think and let think"? It is certainly the case that many LGBTQI+ Methodists possess the "humble, patient love of God and neighbour". They believe in God and have such a trust in Christ as to result in acts of love and mercy to their neighbours, even toward those who have attempted to invalidate the quality of their love and questioned their right to exist. They meet, therefore, Wesley's minimalist definition of a Christian. The question must then be posed, could the first major split in American Methodism for 150 years have been prevented if traditionalist, centrist, and progressive Methodists alike had remained convinced of their own opinion, allowed others to be equally convinced of theirs, and agreed to offer only love to each other and to all people? How is it that a particular view of human sexuality has been elevated to the point that it became the legitimation for a church schism? Such a move displaces the core message of God's reconciling love in Christ from the centre of Methodist discourse and replaces it with a particular view of human sexuality which, while it has long historic precedent, is also undergoing serious revision. The entrenching of this position at the centre of a newly formed Methodist denomination will undoubtedly result in exclusionary harm for LGBTQI+ Methodists. We should all be troubled by Hillier, Mitchell and Mulcare's findings that LGBTQI+ youth from religious backgrounds are more likely to self-harm than those from non-religious families.²²

Further, study co-sponsored by the University of Sydney and mental health research group the Black Dog Institute reports that LGBTQI+ young people are "twice as likely to be diagnosed with a mental health condition, six times more likely to have suicidal thoughts and five times more likely to make an attempt on their life than their heterosexual peers."²³ The research of Doug Ezzy and others has shown that the discriminatory policies of religious schools in Australia negatively impacts LGBTQI+ teachers.²⁴ All of this further questions the validity of exclusion in the face of a "think and let think" ethic.

¹⁹ Ibid., 90–92.

²⁰ Ibid., 92–94.

²¹ Ibid., 95.

²² Lynne Hillier, Anne Mitchell, and Hunter Mulcare, "I Couldn't Do Both at the Same Time: Same-Sex Attracted Youth and the Negotiation of Religious Discourse," *Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review* 4, no. 2 (2008).

²³ Black Dog Institute, *Suicide Prevention for LGBTQI+ Communities: Learnings from the National Suicide Prevention Trial*. BDI21_Suicide-prevention-for-LGBTIQ-communities.pdf (blackdoginstitute.org.au), April 2021.

²⁴ Douglas Ezzy, Bronwyn Fielder, Angela Dwyer, and Louise Richardson-Self, "LGBT+ Equality, Religious Freedom and Government-funded Faith-based Religiously Affiliated Educational Workplaces," *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 57:1 (2021): 1–17.

Theological Diversity in the United Methodist Church

In thinking of the theological diversity of United Methodists today it is helpful to consider Wesley's ecclesial context. He was a person who never left the Church of England and worked (with mixed results) to foster among Methodists a love for and loyalty to the Established Church. This was in spite of the fact that theological heresies of all kinds could be found within Anglicanism, even among some bishops, including Deism, Socinianism, and Arianism. Yet Wesley never urged a separation from the Church of England or claimed that it was an apostate organisation. Doubtless, he would have considered any schism to have been a deep wound to the body of Christ. Whatever the idiosyncratic views of individual Anglican clergy, the doctrinal formularies of the Church of England – the Thirty-Nine Articles, The Book of Common Prayer, The Edwardian Homilies – all breathed the spirit of the ancient apostolic faith. Whenever his own doctrines (including the new birth, the witness of the Spirit, and entire sanctification), came under attack as innovations or errors, he consistently appealed to the official Anglican doctrines to support them as thoroughly orthodox.

The United Methodist Church of today is not unlike eighteenth-century Anglicanism in this respect. Its official doctrinal authority is constituted by Holy Scripture, the 25 Articles of Religion (bequeathed to American Methodists by John Wesley in 1784), and Wesley's Standard Sermons. Undoubtedly, many United Methodists, including among the Episcopate, do not hold fast to the doctrines contained in these standards, and there is a lot of theological diversity in the UMC. Officially, however, the historic Christian faith is enshrined in these official standards. In spite of concerted efforts by more progressive Methodists to change its position, the *Book of Discipline* (para 304.3) until recently declared that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church."²⁵ There is much that was objectionable about this statement, and it is now no longer the official position of the UMC. Traditionalists in The United Methodist Church came away from the 2019 General Conference having achieved their goal. In the face of concerted efforts by progressives, supported by many centrist voices, who were comfortable living with difference on what they considered a non-essential belief, the Conference at that time reaffirmed its traditional view on sexuality and retained provisions to allow the censure and discipline of any bishop ordaining or appointing Queer clergy.

The Global Methodist Church

Even in the face of the defeat of the progressivist platform in the UMC, in May of 2022, The Global Methodist Church came into existence. *The Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation* developed out of the frank admission that United Methodists could no longer live together with difference over human sexuality. Open acts of defiance of the official traditional policy would undoubtedly have continued because affirming bishops wanted to act out of their deeply held Methodist convictions, just as traditionalists wanted to do the same in attempting to uphold the provisions of the *Discipline*. The Protocol would have allowed amicable separation from the denomination and financial compensation for the loss of property as well as the preservation of clergy pension funds to the value of millions of dollars. After the postponement of the 2022 General Conference, due to worsening COVID conditions, which would have considered the Protocol and likely approved it, some traditionalists decided they had had enough, and decided they would go ahead anyway and form their own church.

Eight months after its initial formation, the GMC reported 1,200 clergy and 1,100 congregations among its numbers.²⁶ In December 2022, 294 of the 600 congregations in the Texas Conference and 145 of the 200 congregations of the North West Texas Conference disaffiliated from the UMC.²⁷ Outside the US, congregations affiliated in Angola, Bulgaria, The Democratic Republic of Congo, England, Panama, the Philippines, and Slovakia.

²⁵ *Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (2016), para 304.3.

²⁶ Keith Boyette, "The Early Growth of The Global Methodist Church". *Global Methodist Church* <https://globalmethodist.org/the-earlygrowth-of-the-global-methodist-church/> January 18, 2023.

²⁷ Isobella Volment, "439 Texas Congregations granted approval to leave The United Methodist Church," *Dallas Morning News* <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/faith/2022/12/03/439-texas-congregations-granted-approval-to-leave-the-united-methodist-church/> 3 Dec, 2022.

It is likely that more will follow.²⁸ It has formed nine Provisional Districts, four of them outside the US, overseen by presidents and presiding elders. In a rather surprising development, almost all African United Methodist bishops issued a statement denouncing the Africa Initiative and the Wesleyan Covenant Association for supporting the GMC in their episcopal areas.²⁹

Several Conferences adopted programmes to help people decide to stay in the UMC, such as Stay UMC in North Alabama.³⁰ Centrist leaders such as Ken Carter, bishop of Western North Carolina, worked hard from a position of generous orthodoxy, to keep the church together and to minimise harmful rhetoric. The GMC has received ten million dollars from the Wesleyan Covenant Association's "Next Methodism Fund" and had received as of January 2023, \$210,000 in direct donations.³¹ Asbury Theological Seminary (not officially a United Methodist seminary but with a strong majority of United Methodist students) pledged, "renewable, dollar-for-dollar, matching grants to graduates and alumni of Asbury Seminary who are involved in planting new congregations of The Global Methodist Church around the world [...] up to \$500,000 with a corresponding matching gift from The Global Methodist Church."³² While serving as transitional (now chief) connectional officer, Keith Boyette claimed that the GMC would soon exceed the size of both The Free Methodist Church and The Wesleyan Church.³³ By October, the figure had reached 3,800 congregations and The GMC announced that it would hold its convening General Conference in San Jose, Costa Rica on September 20-26, 2024.³⁴

Methodist divisions are not a new phenomenon, but one on this scale has not been seen for a very long time and would appear to run in the opposite direction to Methodism's recent and very significant ecumenical achievements. Nineteenth-century Methodist divisions were not based on doctrinal differences but on the demand for more democratic forms of church government and, in America, on differences over slavery. Of course there were theological dimensions to these controversies, as theology informs all the church's activities, but doctrine was not the cause of division. All the new denominations adopted the same Methodist doctrines, which contributed greatly to the eventual reunion of splintered groups throughout the twentieth century. In British Methodism, the final stage of reunion of most Methodist churches took place in September 1932 with the formation of The Methodist Church of Great Britain. In America, a similar trajectory may be traced from splintering to reunion. The southern and northern churches reunited in 1939 to form The Methodist Church which in turn united with The Evangelical United Brethren in 1968 to form today's UMC. When one considers that Methodists entered into Uniting and United Churches in Canada (1925), South India (1947), North India (1970), and Australia (1977) throughout the twentieth century, it is clear that Methodists contributed widely to significant ecumenical achievements.

It is uncertain whether the GMC will apply for membership of The World Methodist Council and The World Council of Churches. If it does, the evident theological diversity of these bodies will be similar in some respects to that which had existed within the UMC. John Wesley's advice to eighteenth-century Methodists, "If we cannot think alike, we may love alike," has been severely tested in American Methodism and in the global areas represented in the General Conference of the UMC. What if Methodists were to follow Wesley's lead and transfer their focus from arguments *about* faith in Christ to a consideration of *faith itself and its consequences*? We might then find

²⁸ Keith Boyette, "The Early Growth of The Global Methodist Church" *Global Methodist Church* <https://globalmethodist.org/the-earlygrowth-of-the-global-methodist-church/> 18 January 2023.

²⁹ "Statement from Africa Colleges of Bishops", *United Methodist Bishops* <https://www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/files/statement+from+africa+c+colleges+of+bishops+-+sept+8.pdf> Thursday 28 September, 2022.

³⁰ 'A Coalition of North Alabama Methodists Working to Stay in the UMC,' <https://www.stayumc.com/> accessed 9 September 2024.

³¹ Keith Boyette, "The Early Growth of The Global Methodist Church," *Good News Magazine*, <https://goodnewsmag.org/the-early-growth-of-the-global-methodist-church/> no date, accessed 10 September 2024.

³² "Asbury Theological Seminary Signs MOU with The Global Methodist Church," *Asbury Seminary* <https://asburyseminary.edu/news/asbury-theological-seminary-signs-mou-with-the-global-methodist-church/> accessed 10 September 2024.

³³ Keith Boyette, "The Early Growth of The Global Methodist Church," *Good News Magazine*, <https://goodnewsmag.org/the-early-growth-of-the-global-methodist-church/> no date, accessed 10 September 2024. This article appeared two days before the identical one was published on the GMC's website. The earlier article did not include the claims about the Free Methodist and Wesleyan churches. By 1 June 2023, the GMC was claiming 2,500 local churches and 2,750 clergy members. The figure is quoted in Walter B. Fenton, "Rev. Dr. Hayes Joins Global Methodist Church and is Designated Bishop Emeritus," *Global Methodist Church* <https://globalmethodist.org/global-methodist-churchs-convening-general-conference-set-for-san-jose-costa-rica/> 4 October 2023.

³⁴ Walter B. Fenton, 'Global Methodist Church's Convening General Conference Set for San Jose, Costa Rica,' *Global Methodist Church*, <https://globalmethodist.org/global-methodist-churchs-convening-general-conference-setfor-san-jose-costa-rica/> 4 October 2023.

that Queer Methodists possess the same faith as heterosexual and cisgendered Methodists, though refined by patience in the face of exclusion. They have been given the same Holy Spirit as all believers. They are recipients of the same grace of God. They are justified by grace through faith. They are sanctified and will be glorified in the new creation. By baptism they have been incorporated into the body of Christ and by the Spirit ordained to the priesthood of all believers. Some have been set apart through the laying on of hands as ministers of Word and Sacrament. They are the children of God, heirs of God and of Christ. Such reflections are not offered here from a liberal theological stance (a justifiable position from which to engage in theology, but not one which has nurtured me) but from the deeply held Evangelical conviction that Christ died for all, God's grace is offered to all, and that all who have faith in Jesus are the children of God. The transformative work of sanctifying grace does not require the "conversion" of one's sexual orientation, since, while sexual acts are chosen, sexuality is hardwired. In fact, LGBTQI+ Methodists who remain in the church are teaching Christ's way of forgiveness to those who have shunned them. Queer holiness is real.³⁵

Traditionalists have found it difficult to reconcile Queer sexuality with the call to holiness, an obvious and understandable concern for Methodists. The question of how same-sex intimacy is compatible with sanctification must, however, be set alongside the sexual abuse, child abuse, marital infidelity, skyrocketing divorce rates, and moral turpitude that plague the heterosexual Christian community. The holiness exhibited by Queer Christians surely bears the marks of the holiness exhibited by all Christians of whatever sexual orientation or gender identity – the humble, patient love of God and neighbour is not restricted to any particular sexuality any more than it is restricted by race, ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, political affiliation, or any other factor.

Moving to a fully affirming space undoubtedly departs from a traditionally held position, a move the church has made many times before, beginning in the first century when an overwhelmingly Jewish church broke with thousands of years of tradition to admit Gentiles to the covenant community. In the ordination of women, Wesleyans (and others) have broken with a long and established church tradition of excluding women from the ordained ministry. Those who opposed slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries faced formidable traditional and scriptural arguments in defence of the institution as did those who confronted racial segregation laws and apartheid in the twentieth century. Yes, there are scriptural texts that may appear particularly challenging in this debate, but they are only as challenging as "women should be silent in the churches" (1 Cor 14:34-35) and "slaves obey your masters" (Ephesians 6:5). If we can apply those texts differently in the twentieth-first century to the way our ancestors did then we can surely do so with those relevant to this discussion. The work of exegeting the so called "clobber passages" has already been done and done well.³⁶ It is time now, especially for allies, to move on from this work to another stage of listening to Queer theologians for the particular insights they bring to the enrichment of our understanding of the gospel.³⁷

The Assembly of Confessing Congregations (ACC), a conservative reform movement within the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA), decided in March 2023 to cease its operations. It had long declared that the UCA was apostate because of the 15th Assembly's pragmatic recognition that there are two doctrines of marriage in the Church – understood as marriage "between a man and a woman" and as marriage "between two persons." Traditionalists sometimes have asserted that the two different views of human sexuality constitute two different religions or two different gospels. The ACC also made this move, referring to the 15th Assembly in 2018 as having promulgated "a new gospel" in its allowing of same-sex marriage. In its 'Declaration of Faith and Intent', it expressed the view that

³⁶ Explicitly Wesleyan explorations in Queer theology and experience include Karen P. Oliveto, *Our Strangely Warmed Hearts: Coming Out into God's Call* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018); _____, *Together at the Table: Diversity without Division in The United Methodist Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018); Thomas J. Oord, and Alexa Oord, eds. *Why the Church of the Nazarene Should Be Fully LGBTQ+ Affirming* (Grasmere, ID: SacraSage Press, 2023); Keegan Osinski, *Queering Wesley, Queering the Church* (Eugene: OR: Wipf and Stock, 2021).

³⁷ William R.G. Loader, *Sexuality and Gender. Collected Essays* (WUNT 458; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021); _____, *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013); _____, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); _____, *Sexuality in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 2010); Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexual-ity: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Louisville: Westminster Knox Press, 2009).

³⁸ Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, "Thinking Theology and Queer Theory," *Feminist Theology* 15, no. 3 (May 2007): 302–14; Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books,); Bronwyn Fielder and Douglas Ezzy, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Christians: Queer Christians, Authentic Selves* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019); Kathleen T. Talvacchia, Michael F. Pettinger, and Mark Larrimore, *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics* (Eugene: Cascade, 2018).

the "UCA's R[esolution] 64 [on same sex marriage] has instituted a new gospel that is void of the transforming power of the 'Word of God on whom salvation depends (Basis of Union paragraph 5; Romans 1: 16)".³⁸ Such an analysis deserves only to be categorically rejected. To make sexuality determinative of the shape of the gospel would be a genuine heresy since the gospel arises from and is grounded in the free grace of God and from free grace alone. In November 2022, the ACC appealed to the GMC as precedent in its declared intention to separate from the UCA.³⁹ As things eventuated, this separation did not occur since the ACC ceased operations. Perhaps the closing of the ACC is a sign that the UCA has had more success in living together with diverse views on non-essential issues, though its unity will still need to be carefully and lovingly guarded.

Wesley did not consistently live out of the ideal of his own catholic spirit, as is clear from his break with the Moravians, his public disputes with George Whitefield and other Calvinists, and, somewhat paradoxically, his virulent anti-Catholicism. He seemed content for Moravians, Calvinistic Methodists, Evangelicals within the Church of England and pious Dissenters of all kinds to remain within their separate ecclesial communities and love one another across the bows. The sermon on a catholic spirit does not include any proposal for amalgamations, no such organic union being a necessary part of catholic love. This is important for this discussion, because it shows that the catholic spirit ideal addresses all Christians and not simply traditionalist, centrist, and progressive voices in the United Methodist Church. Now that the ecclesial division of the UMC is a reality, the call to live out the catholic spirit ideal will apply to Methodist siblings across the entire range of personal convictions on sexuality.

Conclusion

Debates about inclusion speak to the core message of the church, not only among Methodists but throughout the church catholic. The question of whether it is possible fully to embrace Queer Christians represents a crisis in the Christian church, but also an opportunity. The Fijian theologian James Bhagwan pointed out (during daily Bible studies delivered jointly with Seforosa Carroll at the 15th Assembly of the UCA in July 2018) that in Pasifika culture, when a new sail is woven, in much the same way as grass mats, the strands must be loose enough to pick up the wind of the Spirit but tight enough to keep the vessel seaworthy.

Sometimes we have to engage in some theological weaving, drawing together scripture, reason, tradition, and experience to shape a church that will hold together, while catching the wind of the Spirit to journey to new places. John Wesley's method of narrowing disputes among Methodists by shifting from debates *about* the faith to *faith itself* and its consequences might have provided a phenomenological and experiential basis for a fully affirming Methodism. For now, the failure to live out of Wesley's ideal of a catholic spirit has resulted in a sail too stiff to catch the wind of the Spirit, a rupture in the Methodist community, and a stalling of the movement toward the fully affirming Methodism of the future.

³⁸ 'Declaration of Faith and Intent of The Assembly of Confessing Congregations, Inc.' <https://confessingcongregations.org.au/announcing/> 27 November 2022, last accessed 6 February 2023.

³⁹ Ibid., fn. 18, p. 5.

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