

January, 2020 | Local Methodists grapple with proposed split over LGBTQ inclusion

<https://www.toledoblade.com/news/religion/2020/01/26/The-great-divide-methodists-take-heart-in-plan-to-split-denomination/stories/20200126016>

Barb and Tony Lane saw their faith community as a family.

She played in the bell choir. He wrote plays that were staged at the church. They both led Bible studies and grew close to their pastors and co-congregants over nearly 18 years.

Then they made a tough decision: They left.

"It was devastating for both of us," Mrs. Lane said.

"The thing is," her husband added, "we love those people. We did not leave in anger."

They left because they felt they could not be a part of a faith tradition that denies full inclusion to those who identify as LGBTQ, they said. Their own adult children are among that category, although the couple said they've been vocal on the issue well before their children came out.

It's not a new position within the United Methodist Church, which, in its Book of Discipline, holds that "the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." But it is an issue that has painfully come to a head in the last year, in the aftermath of a vote of global delegates at a special session of the General Conference in St. Louis in February.

The Lanes were among those followed the proceedings closely last year, Mrs. Lane tuning into a livestream from the conference floor during her lunch breaks. Intended to finally settle the long-simmering issue in the denomination, potentially by opening a door for some congregations to perform same-sex marriages and ordain gay and lesbian clergy, the vote ultimately went in favor of traditionalists with a plan to strengthen the pre-existing position.

It led to a greater sense of division with the United Methodist Church.

It's in this context that 16 well-regarded representatives of the global church — including West Ohio Bishop Gregory Palmer, who oversees the Maumee Watershed District — earlier this month presented a proposal to split the United Methodist Church. Under the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation, traditionalists would break away to establish a new denomination, an arrangement that would enable each side to “continue to live out the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, albeit in different expressions,” as one signer of the protocol put it in a statement on Jan. 3.

Those with a stake in the future of the denomination caution that it's early to prognosticate, as delegates won't consider the separation proposal until the 2020 General Conference in May. But locals representing traditional, centrist and progressive views spoke of the separation proposal in largely positive terms, casting it as a pragmatic means of finally moving forward in ministry.

“We had clearly reached an impasse as a church, and something had to happen,” Pastor Larry Clark of Monroe Street UMC said. “This seems to be the best outcome that one could expect.”

His church belongs to the Reconciling Ministries Network, which advocates for full inclusion of all gender identities and sexual orientations in the United Methodist Church.

Chris Steiner tends to bring a more traditionalist view to the conversation. He was a voting delegate last year and will be again in 2020.

While Mr. Steiner said it's too early to say whether he would vote for the protocol, which is still being written as legislation and could yet be amended before it's put to the delegates as a vote, he said in an email that he is “in favor of an amicable separation.”

“I just don't see any point in continuing to debate the issues which divide us,” he said.

Path to separation

Bishop John Yambasu of the Sierra Leone Episcopal Area is credited with convening the 16 stakeholders, who hammered out details of the separation proposal in three two-day mediated sessions in Washington, D.C., beginning in October. They did so in an unofficial capacity, albeit one that held significant weight because of the diverse geographic and ideological constituencies they represented.

Bishop Palmer said he was brought in as one of five bishops representing the United States. Another Ohioan, the Rev. David Meredith of Cincinnati, was also at the talks, representing several organizations within the church that advocate inclusivity.

Bishop Palmer said their objective at mediation wasn't necessarily to split the denomination, a prospect that the three plans on the table at last year's conference had sought to avoid. One plan would have set up traditionalist, centrist and progressive branches under the umbrella of the United Methodist Church, while another would have let individual congregations choose how they wanted to handle same-sex weddings and ordinations of gay and lesbian clergy.

"I think the objective in the macro sense was not to have a repeat of our experience in St. Louis," he said, referencing the emotional peak it brought to the issue. "I would say pretty early the idea [came up]: If we're headed toward some form of separation, can we do it well? Can it be more amicable than it might otherwise be? The idea that separation might be a pathway that is more healthy than what we had been doing was there, but I do think people entered into it in the hope that ... there might be a way to stay together without a separation."

The protocol establishes voting thresholds by which geographic conferences and individual congregations can leave the United Methodist Church; the new traditionalist denomination would receive \$25 million, and congregations would keep their properties, among other details.

Conferences and congregations are not required to vote, and those that do not would remain in the post-separation United Methodist Church.

Their protocol is presented as a proposal to the delegates, Bishop Palmer said. It joins several that already have been submitted for consideration at the 2020 General Conference, including one that a local centrist pastor helped to develop this summer. The Indianapolis Plan similarly calls for a separation, and the pastor, the Rev. Doug Damron of Epworth UMC, spoke positively of the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation. He's now backing it.

Bishops do not vote at General Conference. Of the West Ohio Conference's 14 delegates, two are from northwest Ohio: Mr. Steiner, a lay person who belongs to Church of the Cross, and the Rev. Tom Rand of Sylvania First United Methodist Church.

Like others asked for predictions on the future of the denomination, Bishop Palmer was cautious, but said he felt the protocol merited consideration at the General Conference.

"I feel that it provides a pathway that allows a lot of people with differences of view to move forward in ways that are healthier than we have been operating," he said.

Ripples in Toledo

Pastors in Toledo largely echoed the statement: If a denominational divide does not feel like an ideal solution, it at least feels like a needed way to amicably move beyond an impasse.

“The sacrifice that’s being made by our denomination allows each side to live into who they truly are authentically,” said St. Paul UMC’s Pastor Mary Sullivan, who even as she supported a church-choice plan last year recognized that it would have required an “awkward compromise.” “I think that offers a lot of grace for both sides to be who they believe God is calling them to be.”

Epworth’s Pastor Damron spoke similarly. “I think this plan of separation gives us an opportunity to part peacefully, extending to one another a mutual blessing,” he said.

It’s a parting that would inevitably raise questions in Toledo, as it would throughout the world, including how local congregations would align, and how local congregants would react. Many local congregations see a wide variety of perspectives in their pews, and some pastors spoke with more confidence than others about their expectations.

The Rev. Phil Park-Thomas pastors rural congregations in Hoytville and North Baltimore, in Wood County, where he said demographics skew older and perspectives skew conservative. He wonders what would happen if their denominational ties came to a vote, and he wonders what would happen if even one family chooses to leave.

“We’re talking about churches where your average attendance is 40 to 50 people on Sunday morning,” he said. “The loss of a few people is traumatic.”

Barb and Tony Lane left Maumee UMC for Monroe Street UMC in June, drawn to its reputation for inclusion. The couple waited to leave until they had fulfilled their commitments in Maumee. Mrs. Lane didn’t want to leave the bell choir scrambling to cover her tones, and neither she nor her husband wanted to leave halfway through their Bible study.

Mrs. Lane said she feels heartened about the separation plan, seeing it as a way she could remain in the United Methodist Church. It could even be a way back to her longtime church, depending on how that congregation would align, if it were to come to a decision.

Born and raised in the United Methodist Church, and immersed in it throughout her adult life, she said it wasn’t until she and her husband were church shopping that she realized just how much she identified with the denomination; it’s been difficult to feel at odds with it.

Mr. Lane is supportive of the protocol, too. But in a sentiment he shares with others in the area, it’s not without some sadness.

"I always took great pride in being part of the United Methodist Church, which covered the spectrum from liberal to conservative, progressive to traditional," he said. "When we taught a class or attended a Bible study and people had different views than me, I enjoyed the discussion and debate."

It's one of the reasons he said he loved Maumee UMC. He and his wife described a wide range of perspectives there.

"To have that removed now, to have it split, I think it's sad," he said. "I'm disappointed in losing my megaphone to be able to talk to the conservative side, but being happy that my son and daughter don't have to feel like they don't belong."