

Questions from Holy Huddles

Below you will find a list of some of the questions that have been submitted during the Holy Huddle gatherings. They are grouped by topic and similar questions are combined. This is a working document and as questions are submitted, they will be posted here. Please check back regularly.

Last Updated on: 4/6/17

The United Methodist Church/United Methodist Book of Discipline/United Methodist Polity

How is the Book of Discipline changed/edited? Is this done by Bishops, congregations, ministers, etc.? Is the Book of Discipline being considered to be revised?

As the primary legislative body, General Conference is the only entity with the authority to speak on behalf of the entire United Methodist Church. The General Conference meets every four years to consider the business and mission of the church. An equal number of laity (non-clergy) and clergy delegates are elected from United Methodist conferences around the world to decide matters of policy and procedure for the denomination. The nearly 1,000 delegates are elected by annual conferences (at annual conference sessions) to attend General Conference. General Conferences are held in years divisible by 4, such as 2008, 2012, 2016, 2020, etc. General Conference last met in Portland, OR, in 2016 and it will meet next in Minneapolis, MN in 2020.

Bishops attend the General Conference but cannot vote. Different bishops serve as presiding officers during the conference. Other bishops cannot speak unless permission is specifically granted by the delegates.

During General Conference, delegates discuss and vote on petitions and resolutions proposed by individuals, agencies, annual conferences, and other groups within the denomination. These actions result in a revision of the Book of Discipline, the denomination's book of law, and Book of Resolutions, policies of the denomination on current social issues.

It is at General Conference where delegates wrestle with today's issues in light of scriptural teachings and the church's understanding of that teaching. Here is where the church's official stands and church policies are made regarding such issues as human sexuality, abortion, war and peace, as well as determination of ministries and funding.

In addition, to help guide our thinking and acting about how we live in, and are engaged in ministry in the world, The United Methodist Church has created statements to guide the church in its efforts to create a world of justice.

"Our Social Creed" is a basic statement of our convictions about the fundamental relationships between God, God's creation and humanity. This basic statement is expanded in a more lengthy statement called the "Social Principles." This statement explains more fully how United Methodists are called to live in the world. Part of our *Book of Discipline*, the "Social Principles" serve as a guide to official church action and our individual witness. To read the Social Principles and Social Creed, click [here](#).

Will we have a “foundation of beliefs” for the Methodists or just everyone do their own thing? Would we ever do another non-United Methodist thing? Leave the questions of ordination and same-sex marriage to individual congregations like the UCC?

The United Methodist structure and organization began as a means of accomplishing the mission of spreading scriptural holiness. Methodism’s founder, John Wesley, recognized the need for an organized system of communication and accountability and developed what he called the “connexion,” a network of classes, societies, and annual conferences.

Today, our denomination continues to be organized in a “connectional” system, which “enables us to carry out our mission in unity and strength” (*Paragraph 701, 2016 Book of Discipline*). Every local church is linked to an interconnected network of organizations that join together in mission and ministry, allowing us to accomplish far more than any one local church or person could alone.

Within the connectional structure of The United Methodist Church, conferences provide the primary groupings of people and churches for discernment and decision-making. Wesley described Christian conferencing as a spiritual discipline through which God’s grace may be revealed. At every level of the connection, church leaders and members come together in conversation, or conferencing, to discuss important issues and discover God’s will for the church. The word, conference, thus refers to both the assembly and organization of people as well as the process of discerning God’s call together.

Both laypeople and clergy are needed in “our theological task.” The laypeople bring understandings from their ongoing effort to live as Christians in the complexities of a secular world; clergy bring special tools and experience acquired through intensive biblical and theological study. We need one another.

But how shall we go about our theological task so that our beliefs are true to the gospel and helpful in our lives? In John Wesley’s balanced and rigorous ways for thinking through Christian doctrine, we find four major sources or criteria, each interrelated. These we often call our “theological guidelines”: Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

This Wesleyan Quadrilateral, combined with the Book of Discipline, Book of Resolutions, and Social Principles guide us in the ministry to which we are called.

Why don’t Methodists accept the rules of the Methodist Book of Discipline?

While there is a foundation of beliefs for United Methodists, there is also the freedom for varying opinions about those beliefs.

When and how did the wording in the Book of Discipline become established regarding sexuality of clergy? What was the reason for addressing sexuality?

As stated previously, during General Conference, delegates discuss and vote on petitions and resolutions proposed by individuals, agencies, annual conferences, and other groups within the denomination. These actions result in a revision of the Book of Discipline, the denomination's book of law, and Book of Resolutions, policies of the denomination on current social issues. It is at General Conference where delegates wrestle with today's issues in light of scriptural teachings and the church's understanding of that teaching. Here is where the church's official stands and church policies are made regarding such

issues as human sexuality, abortion, war and peace, as well as determination of ministries and funding. It is at General Conference that the rules and guidelines can be created, amended, edited, or removed.

For over 40 years at General Conference, there have been many petitions that relate to the various issues around human sexuality. The issue of homosexuality was first openly debated in the church at the 1972 General Conference, four years after the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren churches joined to form The United Methodist Church. Issues related to sexuality have continued to be debated at General Conference gatherings since then.

If the church splits, what are the reasonably possible courses of action for both how it would be done and what its parts will be?

Faithful United Methodists differ widely on matters of human sexuality. We are called to work toward full inclusivity to endeavor to tear down the walls that divide the human family. Matters such as racism, oppression, and ageism are just some of the concerns that divide us. Highlighted is the increasingly unsustainable nature of the current prohibitions in the Book of Discipline against the LGBTQ community. We are urged to continue our efforts to be a church open to all people. Although much is being done in this regard, we are being encouraged to be a church that is not composed of people who all think exactly alike, but rather are unified in their desire to be engaged in life-changing mission and ministry.

If the UMC motto is “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors” why are so many minds closed?

For many years now, United Methodist churches have understood their mission to be “Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” This was to be accomplished through ministry in local churches which would be places of “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors.” Yet in reality, some of our churches have not been as open as that slogan proclaims. The recent actions of the church address the need for our churches to continue to be intentional about embracing the diversity in humanity so that churches are clear about affirming diversity and will hopefully experience greater growth and greater vitality.

The Commission on the Way Forward: Who comprises this? Is the gay/lesbian/transgender community represented (adequately)? What about the influence and power of the African church? Is the Commission looking at the church 25-50 years from now? Does the Commission Team have the authority to recommend structural changes to the church such as the creation of central conferences or changes to the Book of Discipline?

At the General Conference 2016, in the midst of an effort to solve our differences through legislative processes, a decision was made to ask the bishops to lead the denomination. The Council of Bishops responded with a request to defer all votes on human sexuality and refer this subject to a special Commission. This Commission will hopefully find a way to address the differences in theological understanding of matters of human sexuality. The Council also encouraged a moratorium on church trials as a means of resolving complaints in this regard. Our Desert Southwest resolution calls for such a moratorium in urging non-discrimination toward LGBTQ persons and is in concert with the work that the Council of Bishops is doing.

From the Commission:

The Commission will bring together persons deeply committed to the future(s) of The United Methodist Church, with an openness to developing new relationships with each other and exploring the potential

future(s) of our denomination in light of General Conference and subsequent annual, jurisdictional and central conference actions. We have a profound hope and confidence in the Triune God, and yet we acknowledge that we do this work in a climate of skepticism and distrust, from a human point of view. We are a connection, and we admit that our communion is strained; yet much transformative mission across our world is the fruit of our collaboration. The matters of human sexuality and unity are the presenting issues for a deeper conversation that surfaces different ways of interpreting Scripture and theological tradition. The work is meant to inform deliberation across the whole church and to help the Council of Bishops in their service to the next General Conference in finding a way forward.

The Commission will design a way for being church that maximizes the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible, that allows for as much contextual differentiation as possible, and that balances an approach to different theological understandings of human sexuality with a desire for as much unity as possible. This unity will not be grounded in our conceptions of human sexuality, but in our affirmation of the Triune God who calls us to be a grace-filled and holy people in the Wesleyan tradition.

We should be open to new ways of embodying unity that move us beyond where we are in the present impasse and cycle of action and reaction around ministry and human sexuality. Therefore, we should consider new ways of being in relationship across cultures and jurisdictions, in understandings of episcopacy, in contextual definitions of autonomy for annual conferences, and in the design and purpose of the apportionment. In reflection on the two matters of unity and human sexuality, we will fulfill our directive by considering “new forms and structures” of relationship and through the “complete examination and possible revision” of relevant paragraphs in the Book of Discipline. We will give consideration to greater freedom and flexibility to a future United Methodist Church that will redefine our present connectionality, which is showing signs of brokenness. If we ignore this work, fracturing will occur in more haphazard and even self-interested ways across the church. If we do this work only to address our preferences and self-interest, we will fail to place our complete trust in God’s steadfast love and faithfulness. If we do this work with complete surrender to God’s unlimited imagination and kingdom purposes, we will be blessed beyond our limited human imagination. God remains God; God is with us; God will never let us go. To God be the glory!

To view a list of the Commission Members, click [here](#).

To read more about the Commission, click [here](#).

Western Jurisdiction/Desert Southwest Conference

What do you mean by full inclusion?

Underlying all other positions of the denomination is the constitutional principle of “Inclusiveness of the Church” in the Book of Discipline: “The United Methodist Church is a part of the church universal, which is one Body in Christ. The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth. All persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status or economic condition shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, upon baptism be admitted as baptized members, and upon taking vows declaring the Christian faith, become professing members in any local church in the connection. ...” (Article IV, Paragraph 4, 2016 Book of Discipline)

Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to supporting those rights and liberties for all persons, regardless of sexual orientation.

We see a clear issue of simple justice in protecting the rightful claims where people have shared material resources, pensions, guardian relationships, mutual powers of attorney, and other such lawful claims typically attendant to contractual relationships that involve shared contributions, responsibilities, and liabilities, and equal protection before the law.

Moreover, we support efforts to stop violence and other forms of coercion against all persons, regardless of sexual orientation.

Explain what a reconciling church is. Is our conference formally a reconciling conference?

According to the Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN) of The United Methodist Church [website](#), the Reconciling process takes intentional planning, educating, and the organizing of small groups, congregations, and various levels of living into the vision of a fully inclusive church. The journey toward Reconciling affiliation has been undertaken by individuals, United Methodist groups and committees, Annual Conferences, and ecumenical collaborations. The Reconciling process will take intentional planning, educating, and the organizing of small groups, congregations, and various levels of living into the vision of a fully inclusive church and world. A Reconciling community must have an approved statement that specifically names a welcome of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

In 2013, at the Desert Southwest Annual Conference Session, the body voted to adopt the Marriage Equality Resolution found [here](#).

In 2016, the Desert Southwest Annual Conference Session adopted the *Resolution for Full Inclusivity as a Path to the Growth and Vitality of the Church*. View the full resolution [here](#).

Has our conference decided to take a position in favor of performing same-sex marriages?

Do we accept and adhere to our stated polity (BOD parag 304.3)?

Now that same-sex marriage is legal in the United States, these are interesting and important questions. First and foremost, a pastor maintains the freedom and responsibility to discern which marriages to perform. In all cases, pastors are to spend time with couples in counseling session to assist them in determining whether the couple is fit and ready to enter into the covenant of marriage. It is always the pastor's discretion whether or not to perform a wedding ceremony for a couple.

In regard to same-sex marriage, although the Book of Discipline prohibits a United Methodist pastor from officiating at a same-sex marriage, the Book of Discipline also is in conflict with itself when it commits us to be in ministry for and with all persons. Pastors who choose to officiate at a same-sex wedding are making a personal and professional decision and should do so because they are being called to serve as the pastor for all persons regardless of sexual orientation. Charges against a pastor may still be filed; however, the resolution encourages us not to rush to a judicial process if someone does not agree with the other pastor's decision.

Bishop Hoshibata has been clear that he does not believe a judicial process is a healthy means of settling disputes in the church. Conversation builds up relationships while the judicial process tears down

relationship. Rather, the Biblical mandate to engage in prayerful conversation with a person you disagree with is a Christ-like preferred option.

If the Bishop and pastors of this conference do not keep their vows to uphold the Book of Discipline, why should church members take seriously their vows to support the church with their time and tithes?

How do you live with the conflict between what the Book of Discipline says and your actions, or the actions of others?

How do you expect us to follow our membership oaths when you ignore the oath you took to uphold the Book of Discipline?

The Book of Discipline is the book of rules by which we order our lives in The United Methodist Church. As such, it contains historic documents such as our Constitution and our Social Principles. Much of the rest of the Book of Discipline is devoted to very specific instruction and requirements for process in our Church. The resolution named above challenges us to look at the world with different eyes, not always depending on the book of rules to determine what is just in God's eyes. It is not anarchy when we question and move counter to the prevailing authority. If there is harm being done or if the rules are unjust, to advocate for change is justice and compassion in action. Wesley encouraged us to depend on the leading of the Holy Spirit as we strive to go on to perfection in this life. The Resolutions that were adopted in 2013 and 2016 invite us to learn and grow so that we can more completely mirror the image of what God wants of us.

Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgendered, Queer (LGBTQ)/Same-Sex Marriage

What does the Bible say about same-sex marriage and homosexuals? Does any scriptures encourage homosexuality? Is homosexuality a sin?

This is a very complex subject, and it is difficult to try to address it briefly. Much of what we know now and understand about what the Bible says about homosexuality has been amplified by more recent research and theological inquiry. But what we know and understand about what Jesus taught and practiced is clear. Jesus did not speak about homosexuality. But he did address other justice issues of his day in his preaching and teaching and in the conduct of his life and ministry. Without question, Jesus taught that a humble and caring heart were precious to God. The resolution that the conference adopted speaks to this kind of spirit, calling the Desert Southwest Conference to develop programs that will help us to become more understanding of others by encouraging cultural competency, and by working to eliminate racism, ageism, sexism, oppression in whatever form they present themselves, including bringing about fear of the members of the LGBTQ community.

How have other denominations moved forward on the issue of human sexuality? How are other denominations addressing inclusion?

The struggle around the issue of sexuality is not unique to The United Methodist Church. Many of the largest U.S. Religious institutions have remained firmly against allowing same-sex marriage, while

several other religious groups have moved to allow same-sex couples to marry and/or perform same-sex marriage ceremonies within their traditions. Pew Research Center has details found [here](#).

One source of conflict is our understanding and interpretation of Scripture. How can we address this issue and seek common ground? The Church is of this world. We are not to be a stumbling block to other believers. Aren't we to set ourselves according to Bible teaching?

Words, stories, scriptures have been handed down from generation to generation. When you go to the library or to purchase a bible, you will not see just one bible on the shelf. Many translations have been written and each time the interpretation may and probably has been changed. So how do you know which scriptures are the true meaning that God/Jesus actually meant for us. Or have they all be stretched, changed, misinterpreted or even written for the writer's own purpose?

As we open our minds and hearts to the Word of God through the words of human beings inspired by the Holy Spirit, faith is born and nourished, our understanding is deepened, and the possibilities for transforming the world become apparent to us.

We properly read Scripture within the believing community, informed by the tradition of that community.

We interpret individual texts in light of their place in the Bible as a whole.

We are aided by scholarly inquiry and personal insight, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As we work with each text, we take into account what we have been able to learn about the original context and intention of that text. In this understanding we draw upon the careful historical, literary, and textual studies of recent years, which have enriched our understanding of the Bible.

Through this faithful reading of Scripture, we may come to know the truth of the biblical message in its bearing on our own lives and the life of the world. Thus, the Bible serves both as a source of our faith and as the basic criterion by which the truth and fidelity of any interpretation of faith is measured.

While we acknowledge the primacy of Scripture in theological reflection, our attempts to grasp its meaning always involve tradition, experience and reason. Like Scripture, these may become creative vehicles of the Holy Spirit as they function within the Church. They quicken our faith, open our eyes to the wonder of God's love, and clarify our understanding.

The close relationship of tradition, experience, and reason appears in the Bible itself. Scripture witnesses to a variety of diverse traditions, some of which reflect tensions in interpretation within the early Judeo-Christian heritage. However, these traditions are woven together in the Bible in a manner that expresses the fundamental unity of God's revelation as received and experienced by people in the diversity of their own lives.

United Methodists as a diverse people continue to strive for consensus in understanding the gospel. In our diversity, we are held together by a shared inheritance and a common desire to participate in the creative and redemptive activity of God.

Our task is to articulate our vision in a way that will draw us together as a people in mission.

In the name of Jesus Christ we are called to work within our diversity while exercising patience and forbearance with one another. Such patience stems neither from indifference toward truth nor from an indulgent tolerance of error but from an awareness that we know only in part and that none of us is able to search the mysteries of God except by the Spirit of God. We proceed with our theological task, trusting that the Spirit will grant us wisdom to continue our journey with the whole people of God.
(Taken from paragraph 105, 2016 Book of Discipline)

LOVE/ACCEPTANCE

How do we love and embrace our fellow church family when they have a completely different viewpoint on this? When others strongly practice their faith in a manner that completely demeans, dis-enfranchises and hurts others, how can we come together and even listen/understand their actions?

Without judging – how do we respond to friends and acquaintances when they say that accepting “homosexuality is not their thing”?

Can we accept the individual but not condone their acts?

How do we move forward? How do we change the hearts and minds of people, especially given the contentious political atmosphere in our own country?

The foundation of Christian living is faith in Christ. Faith is the central loyalty that gives purpose and direction to our lives. Christian faith is grounding our lives in the living God as revealed especially in Jesus the Christ.

This faith does not happen overnight. It’s a journey. From birth to death we’re growing in faith. There are ups and downs — and sometimes long flat stretches where we seem to be stalled in our journey. But little by little, most of us deepen our relationship with God.

In part, this growth in faith is a *gift*. Through our participation in the community of faith, through our openness to God’s love, we receive this marvelous treasure. But faith is also a *choice* we make, an often difficult decision to put God and God’s reign first in our lives, no matter what the cost.

We cannot say that some people are “ahead” in the journey of faith and others “behind.” Faith is not something we possess by degrees. The journey is complex, different for each traveler and involving at least four intertwined pathways: trusting, believing, following, hoping.

Surrounded by the love and encouragement of the community of believers, we persevere on the journey of faith, ever trusting, believing, following and hoping.

Excerpted from The United Methodist Member’s Handbook, Revised and Expanded by George E. Koehler, pp. 62-63.

A convincing witness to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ can contribute to the renewal of our faith, bring persons to that faith, and strengthen the Church as an agent of healing and reconciliation.

In this spirit we take up our theological task. We endeavor through the power of the Holy Spirit to understand the love of God given in Jesus Christ. We seek to spread this love abroad. As we see more clearly who we have been, as we understand more fully the needs of the world, as we draw more effectively upon our theological heritage, we will become better equipped to fulfill our calling as the people of God.

(Taken from paragraph 105, 2016 Book of Discipline)

One response to those around you could be “I accept that it isn’t your thing. It is my thing because...”

MISCELLANEOUS

Where do we stand on Islam/Muslims? How do we stand for freedom of religion when they consider us less than human?

Religious persecution has been common in the history of civilization. We urge policies and practices that ensure the right of every religious group to exercise its faith free from legal, political, or economic restrictions. We condemn all overt and covert forms of religious intolerance, being especially sensitive to their expression in media stereotyping. We assert the right of all religions and their adherents to freedom from legal, economic, and social discrimination.

We dedicate ourselves to peace throughout the world, to the rule of justice and law among nations, and to individual freedom for all people of the world.

(Paragraph 162B, 2016 Book of Discipline)