

Methodists in Search of Unity amidst Division: Considering the Values and Costs of Unity and Separation in the Face of Two Moral Crises: Slavery and Sexual Orientation

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Introduction

For the last decade and more, The United Methodist Church (UMC) has been facing conflict caused by contrasting views of a moral issue: whether or not persons who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender (LGBT)¹ should be welcomed as others into the UMC as lay members or as clergy. The debate has been distressing to all in the church, for many because it has prevented debate and action on many of the other issues associated with Christian ministry. During the last four years, the debate has evolved into intense discussion of ecclesiological issues and has led some members to question the value of maintaining unity within the UMC, or to wonder whether it would be better and, perhaps, more faithful to separate into different institutional structures.

Nearly two centuries ago, the church faced another major divide over a moral issue—slavery. Alongside many differences between the two historical contexts, there are also similarities that church members faced, similarities that can be seen through the debates and actions within the annual and general conferences of the church. The slavery debates in the 1830s and 40s culminated in several splits in Methodism, the largest of which, in 1844, saw no reunion until ninety-five years had passed. Another split that emerged from that moral crisis has never found reunion.²

Today's crisis regarding LGBT persons is theological, moral and civil. The issue has been explosive in Christian and other faith communities. Some Christian communions

¹ Terminology has been part of the debate. The United Methodist Book of Discipline uses the term "homosexual." I choose not to use that term because it objectifies sexuality and minimizes the larger issue of gender orientation. The descriptive term "queer" is used increasingly in academic circles and, like Methodist, is a term once pejorative and now even honored. There is a further issue regarding language. Normally, I prefer not to separate people of all sexual orientations and gender identity. However, until today, there has been little discussion at general conference of gender identity, so I have limited the descriptor to "sexual orientation." Because of some recent issues, that may change by the 2008 General Conference.

² The major split between the South and the North over slavery and related issues occurred shortly after the General Conference of 1844. A year earlier, the strong abolitionist voices, led by Orange Scott, formed the Wesleyan Methodist Church that has never reunited with the larger Methodist family within the United States.

have welcomed the full inclusion of LGBT persons into the life of the church. Other communions have set restrictions and have condemned LGBT persons theologically and have categorized them as living in sin. Churches based in the United States with international memberships (or with strong relationships to wider communions) have been challenged especially because of the polarities and complexities of perspective. The Anglican Communion and the Episcopal Church, USA, have been particularly divided by the crisis.

The crisis over slavery was also theological, moral and civil. It also carried some international dimensions because of the appeal of the delegates of the British Methodist Conference to the Methodist Episcopal Church's³ general conferences. It also caused divisions in other U.S. churches such as among Baptists and Presbyterians.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the two crises and to assess the differences and similarities with regard to the processes of addressing and seeking to resolve the seemingly intractable conflict. First, I will review the challenges to unity at the time of the conflicts and the failure to achieve it. Second, I will seek to define the moral crises facing the churches and use a schema for describing different points of view within the debate. Finally, I will suggest some insights that can be helpful to those in the UMC as they approach the 2008 General Conference.

Understandings of Unity

The people called Methodist arrived in the colonies in the middle of the 1700s and followed the call of John Wesley to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land. The community grew, was "blessed" by John Wesley and separated from Methodists in England, and joined the ecclesial scene as one among other communions making disciples in a land dedicated to religious tolerance. Some causes for the success of Methodism were its effective, hierarchical leadership governed by the bishops presiding over the "Methodist connexion" and the traveling preachers who brought the Wesleyan vision to people across the expanses of wilderness. The growth of the community necessitated a shift from a single annual conference to a general conference meeting every four years (beginning in 1792). Early leadership, including Francis Asbury, emphasized the "inner bonds within the conference," especially how the conference exhibited the unity among the preachers and the religious quality of the meeting.⁴

³ The Methodist Episcopal Church was established in the United States in 1784. It split over slavery in 1844 when an additional general conference met to form the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The Northern church, meeting in its general conference, repudiated the split thus forcing to civil courts to adjudicate the issue of property.

⁴ Russell E. Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America*, p. 22.

Since the beginning of U.S. Methodism, tensions within the body inevitably challenged the sense of community or fraternity among the members. The growth of the church led to disagreements over leadership. Preachers began to “locate” rather than be among the ranks of the traveling preachers. Tension grew over the question of their authority relative to the traveling preachers. Additionally, the question of the role of laity in leadership also emerged. The result of these and other disputes led to the first break in the unity of the fellowship. In 1828, some of the community withdrew to form a new communion that came to be called the Methodist Protestant Church.

Unity Threatened by Slavery

The growth of the church in different regions of the country brought very different economic, social and theological influences upon leaders and members. Among these was the development of slavery as a prominent social institution in the South led to very different attitudes toward this institution that John Wesley deeply opposed. For example, from 1784 through 1844, the following question in the *Discipline* regarding slavery read in slightly different forms during the years: “What methods can we take to extirpate slavery?”⁵ The Southern annual conferences pressed for new language to accept the reality of the slavery among their members. They wanted the *Discipline* to add guidance concerning the well-being of the slave, such as providing education time to attend worship. Northerners wanted to call for emancipation of the slave immediately. Obviously, regionalism became a large factor that finally led to the splits of the church in 1843 and 1844.

Accompanying the factor of regionalism was the reality of the growth of the church into many annual conferences. The fraternity of the church, once expressed symbolically in a list of all the traveling preachers, began to see the preachers listed by annual conference with a corresponding shift of fraternity from the whole to the annual conference group. The differing attitudes toward slavery pressed the regions to be sharply critical of one another. As the crisis evolved annual conference resolutions became responsive to one another. The principle instrument of unity--the presiding bishops who traveled from conference to conference (across the whole connection)--came under enormous pressure as the bishops sought to maintain a unity that was quickly disintegrating. The bishops were caught between seeking to guarantee the authority of General Conference as the judicatory body of the church and the moral compunction of the annual conference members to express a position, be it pro-slavery, anti-slavery or somewhere in between.

During the General Conferences of 1836 and 1840 several issues arose that proved the huge difficulty of remaining together in one body as Methodists. The emerging abolitionist movement believed that the Southern Church was losing its opposition to slavery as described in the *Discipline*, asking how to “extirpate” slavery from the communion. Many southerners believed that radical action to remove slavery would be harmful to the church, contrary to civil law and deeply harmful to the slaves themselves.

⁵ See Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845*. An appendix traces the change in language during these years.

Church leaders sought to find a middle ground and searched for measures and instruments that would be faithful to the *Discipline* of the church and would accommodate the needs of the culture of slavery present in so many of the church members, be they slave owners or slaves. The conferences debated these measures, as did the annual conferences, with members representing contrasting points of view. As is evident from the outcome, these attempts and maintenance of the unity came to naught.

The debate over slavery took place over many years and involved other complicating factors. Some of the debates led to changes in the *Discipline*. For instance, state laws legally entrenched slavery within the society. Could the church pass legislation contrary to state or federal law? Some delegates at general conferences sought to pass laws that would call for manumission of slaves and just treatment of them. Persons were even suspended from their Methodist societies for selling or whipping of slaves.⁶ As early as 1816 the *Discipline* allowed for annual conferences in states that did not permit emancipating slaves to form their own regulations to comply with state laws.⁷

In *Slavery and Methodism*, Donald Mathews created a typology of three different voices prominent in the debates over slavery. He describes the “Southerners” as those “publicly unanimous in their dedication to preventing any actions adverse to slavery” and “they threatened to secede from the Church in order to maintain their acceptable position in the South.” Next he portrayed the “abolitionists” as a “troublesome minority in the North who demanded the Church return to the anti-slavery faith of the father.” And, lastly, he speaks of the conservatives who “hoped to keep the Church unified” (Mathews, p. 192).

Unity Threatened by Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

At the 2004 General Conference, on the last day, the following resolution came to the floor of the conference, presented by six delegates representing the five jurisdictions and one Central Conference:

As United Methodists, we remain in covenant with one another, even in the midst of disagreement, and affirm our commitment to work together for a common mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ throughout the world.

The resolution (adopted with 95% approval) was presented because of talk of schism present at the conference. The conservatives had suggested in informal meetings that an “amicable separation” be considered. After seeing this dominant story in media coverage, the delegates felt compelled to add their voice to advocate for the unity of the church.

There may have been other times during the 1800s or 1900s that saw the Methodist Church on verge of schism. It could also be true that the present time is not close to schism. However, the 2004 General Conference conflict may mark the first time the voice of organizational schism became public in the UMC in many years. It also emerges

⁶ See Mathews, p. 33 about actions in Baltimore Conference between 1799 and 1820.

⁷ See Mathews, p. 302.

at a time when the fear of schism is present in the people because of developments in other communions. The Episcopal Church, USA, has undergone the first stages of division (with congregations leaving the denomination) and this U.S. branch of the Anglican communion has been deeply affected by the international perspectives of the debate. In the same way, the international voices at the table in the UMC add a dimension and influence to the debate different than in other, more “national” denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church, USA, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

The debate over sexual orientation and gender identity has deeply affected the general conferences from 1996 through 2004 and will be prominent in 2008 as well. However, the debate long precedes this timeframe. During the 1970s the debates over sexual orientation began. The person said to be the first openly gay minister in a Christian denomination in the United States was United Methodist Paul Abels. He served as pastor of Washington Square UMC in New York City. In 1977 he was featured in an article in the *New York Times* (Nov. 27, 1977) entitled “Minister Sponsors Homosexual Rituals.” Because of publicity from the article, a controversy erupted in the church. The bishop of his New York Annual Conference sought to place Abels on leave but the annual conference voted that he was qualified for appointment. In 1979 the Judicial Council affirmed that he was in “effective standing” and “good relation” so he needed to be appointed. The controversy led to an action of General Conference in 1984 prohibiting that a “self-avowed, practicing homosexual” be appointed as a minister to a church. The term “self-avowed” was further defined by the 1996 General Conference and the language has remained in the *Book of Discipline* ever since. This phrase, interpreted as a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy as well as other prohibitions, have led to numerous trials since that time.⁸ The controversy has also created tension between the bishops and the annual conferences when, as in the situation of Paul Abels, the annual conferences have continued to vote the person as eligible for appointment. For instance, in the trial of the Rev. Karen Damman in the Pacific-Northwest Annual Conference, Bishop Galvan appealed to the Judicial Council since he believed himself caught between two disciplinary mandates: appointing those clergy deemed by the annual conference eligible for appointment, and being restricted from appointing a minister who is a “self-avowed, practicing homosexual.”

Actions at the 1996 General Conference extended and dramatized the debate. During the Council of Bishops meeting in Denver that preceded the General Conference, several bishops began to circulate a statement of protest to the language of the *Book of Discipline* containing “proscriptions...against gay and lesbian persons.” The bishops wrote, *We believe it is time to break the silence and state where we are on this issue that is hurting and silencing countless faithful Christians.*” The response to the statement of dissent was

⁸ Other trials were those of Rose Mary Denman in 1987, Jimmy Creech in 1998, Gregory Dell in 1999, Karen Damman in 2000, and Beth Stroud in 2004. Trials related to both the appointment of gay or lesbian persons as well as clergy participating in the celebration of same sex marriages/union. There were other hearings and trials during these years.

tumultuous. Many people were happy to have the strong voice of dissent from leaders of the church. Many others were outraged by what they saw as the breach of covenant and the fostering of dissent by those charged with the responsibility for church unity. Both the statement of dissent and a statement from the whole Council a few days later affirmed that all bishops would uphold the “church’s doctrine and discipline.”

The next two general conferences also saw dramatic action. In 2000 a different kind of protest occurred by those strongly opposed to the church’s position. More than 180 persons protested inside the plenary hall with another 300 joining them outside the hall. Nearly 180 persons (including one bishop) were arrested. Many wondered whether it was the first General Conference to call upon civil authorities to establish order in a conference setting. The rally had support from civil rights leaders from inside and outside the church including the Rev. James Lawson and family members of both the Gandhi and King families.⁹ In 2004 no civil disobedience occurred. However, the rights and the question of full inclusion of LGBT persons dominated the Conference. There was also an informal conversation between persons on the two sides of the issue. At those discussions there were the first suggestions of an “amicable separation” of the church. (“Amicable” was assumed to mean that the churches would be able to leave with their property.) The news media heard and received information about the discussions of separation and that became the major news story of the conference. It led to the unity resolution that is mentioned above.

During the last two years another issue has arisen that will be part of the 2008 General Conference debate. A pastor refused to receive a gay man into membership of his congregation because he was not repentant of his sexual orientation. The Judicial Council upheld the right of the local pastor to do so. The action has led to consultations on membership and has led to reflection on Methodist ecclesiology that will have consequences for the debate in the future. It caused the Council of Bishops and other circles of United Methodists to question upon what grounds a pastor may have the right and be able to refuse membership to a candidate. Some persons who were undecided on the question of appointment of LGBT clergy or support of same-sex unions have strongly questioned why membership could be denied because of sexual orientation. The lines of demarcation between the different sides of the debate became less clear.

Understanding Different Attitudes toward Unity

From 1990 through 2003, I served as the General Secretary of the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns of The United Methodist Church (GCCUIC). That commission, an agency of the denomination, is responsible for issues of Christian unity, and that was usually understood to mean unity between denominations such as between Methodists and Catholics. However, after the 1996 General Conference, it became obvious that the unity within the denomination was in crisis. The bishops’ dissent as well as the awareness of trials and the pain they caused, made this clear. Were there actions that the Commission could take that would facilitate the recovery or the

⁹ Information taken from the United Methodist News Service report, May 10, 2000.

growth of that unity? Was there a cost to the unity that Methodists seek, a cost beyond which the unity would lose its authenticity? The committee decided to bring together persons representing “more liberal” and “more conservative”¹⁰ perspectives for a series of dialogues to see if the participants could envision ways to move forward together with either further understanding or recommended actions. The group convened twice in November 1997 and February 1998. After much discussion, the final report received the unanimous approval of the twenty-four people who were gathered.¹¹

Two items were raised as “Challenges that Harbor the Danger of Explicit Disunity or Schism.” The first was differing understandings of the authority of Scripture and divine revelation. (Bishop Judith Craig described this issue as a worldview difference between those gathered.) The second item concerned how we regard the “boundaries” of the church. Rather than looking at people on one or the other side of the issue, the report made clear that there are persons within the discussion who, in conscience, cannot participate conscientiously in a church that holds a viewpoint on this issue dramatically different from their own. On either side of the debate there are persons with this perspective. They are categorized as “incompatibilists.” Similarly, there are people on both sides of the debate who can remain in the church even if they personally are in disagreement with the position demanded by the *Book of Discipline*. They are called “compatibilists.” Here are descriptions of the two groups from the report:

Incompatibilists do not believe that these divergent judgments can be housed indefinitely within the same denomination. They believe that the church is faced with a difficult choice many will want to avoid but which cannot ultimately be ignored. The difference with the compatibilists goes beyond the issues of sexual morality and authority. In part, the difference is ecclesiological; it concerns the nature of the church as the body of Christ. At stake is a crisis of conscience about the very identity and continuity of the church. It is a question of ecclesiological integrity. Incompatibilists with completely different points of view regarding the morality of homosexual practice join together in believing that the continuation of the position opposing their own will lead to the further erosion of loyalty to the church, to the possible departure of many faithful members, and, ultimately, to the internal fracturing of the denomination. They realize that this is not always easy to grasp on the part of those who do not share their conviction; yet, unless it is acknowledged, a matter of the highest consequence is ignored (p. 8).

Compatibilists believe that both sides on the issues of the morality of homosexual behavior and the nature and status of divine revelation, can be held together within the same denomination. Such unity will be no easy achievement. It will require

¹⁰ Within the discussions of the commission, the terms “more liberal” and “more conservative” came to be used. “Liberal” and “conservative” by themselves were unacceptable as were other terms such as “orthodox” or “radical.”

¹¹ *In Search of Unity: A Conversation with recommendations for the Unity of The United Methodist Church*. Published by the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns of The United Methodist Church. February 2008. Available on the Commission website: <http://gccuic-umc.org/web/printedresources.htm>.

great skill, humility, and patience. In principle it can be achieved and, in so far as it exists, bears witness to the diversity of the body of Christ. Compatibilists believe the church can and should live with its disagreements (p. 7).

Incompatibilists believe that the opposing point of view to their own is simply contrary to the gospel. For more liberal incompatibilists, the sin of exclusion denies the commitment to the Church of Jesus Christ. For more conservative incompatibilists, condoning homosexual practice would cause the church to forfeit its designation as the “body of faithful people where the pure Word of God is preached...”

The schema of compatibility seems helpful when referring to either of the crises addressed in this paper. When the conflict between parties is believed by some to affect the ecclesiological nature of what it means to be the Church of Jesus Christ, then the ability to remain in the church together grows increasingly fragile and eventually impossible. In both crises, the number of incompatibilists seemed to grow through the years making reconciliation difficult, if not impossible.

Application of the Schema to the Crisis over Slavery

As noted above, Donald Mathews in *Slavery and Methodism* noted divisions among three different groups in the slavery debate: Southerners, abolitionists and conservatives. The early parts of the book track the shift of many in the church, especially in the South, from a condemnation of slavery and slave-holding to various forms of accommodation. Mathews notes how John Wesley had been deeply opposed to slavery as had Frances Asbury (5-7). However, the official position of the church softened as Methodism spread in the south and more Methodists became slaveholders. Mathews traces how, as early as 1796, the General Conference sought language to appease southern slaveholders (20). Deference was made to state laws and to particular circumstances in order to over-rule the emancipation of slaves. What Mathews calls “the sectional adjustment” and the “southern compromise of conscience” was profound.

I suggest that Southerners moved in the early 19th century from being incompatibilists to compatibilists as did many of the church leaders north and south whose responsibility was to hold the church together. They may have maintained for many years a general belief in the moral evil of slavery but increasingly found reasons why it needed to be continued: for the sake of the slaver who needed support, because of state laws forbidding emancipation, for the conversion of the slave to Christianity and for the possible re-colonization of the slaves to Africa. By the 1840s the Southerners abandoned altogether a belief in the moral evil of slavery. For the sake of the unity of the fellowship, many northern leaders had compassion for their southern colleagues and joined the compatibilist ranks. They sought to maintain the church’s unity and were also sympathetic to movements such as the Mission to the Slaves and the Colonization Society. These two examples give insight into the attraction of the compatibilist position. Finally, the Southerners moved later in the 1800s from being compatibilists to again being incompatibilists, this time accepting no consideration of moral judgment upon them for being slaveholders.

Compatibilists emphasized what I would call instruments of institutional maintenance that would often be plans to move away from slavery but would never actually attain the goal. Two such instruments were the Mission to the Slaves and, secondly, the Colonization Society.

A Mission to the Slaves grew out of the wider proclamation of Methodist mission to all peoples. Methodist's attraction to African Americans was obvious from the beginning. Twenty percent of all Methodists in the United States were African-Americans in 1800 and by 1844 one third of all Southern African American Christians were Methodist (120,00).¹² A Mission to the Slaves had noble roots; yet, it began to serve the goal of institutional maintenance or preserving the status quo of slavery. Mathews traces the course of the Mission to the Slaves and how it replaced the advocacy for emancipation. As might be imagined, the "mission" could serve as an instrument of liberation or as an aid to the institution of slavery. Increasingly, the mission was to "humanize" the institution of slavery, encourage obedient slaves, offer spiritual salvation to the slaves, etc. For many northerners, the Mission provided a way to help the slaves and assuage their consciences without confronting the Southerners with the call for emancipation. The need to keep the religion separated from political considerations was another way that the way the Mission was presented to avoid the challenging message still present in the *Discipline* calling for the "extirpation" of slavery.

What Mathews calls "still another conscientious alternative to an ultimate compromise of their anti-slavery principles" was the development of the Colonization Society (88). It started out slowly after a first trip to Africa in 1815 with 38 African Americans. Yet, quickly, Methodist and other church groups supported the society. The well-known Methodist leader, Nathan Bangs, strongly supported the Society at the 1824 General Conference where it gained the church's approbation that was further confirmed at the 1832 Conference. (Bangs was then Secretary of the Mission Society of the ME Church) (91). Another leader, President Wilbur Fisk of Wesleyan University, was a strong advocate and he even served as a colonization agent for the Society. Mathews reports that Fisk argued how important the Society was for the Southerner and how he was frustrated by the abolitionist opposition to the Society (107).¹³ Fisk and Bangs made good examples of "compatibilists" seeking their way for the good of the Church while aware, at the same time, that their actions would postpone the day of emancipation, a day that must have seemed very far away.

There are also good illustrations of incompatibilists within the church debates over slavery. The early and prominent examples are the abolitionists. Mathews writes, "Abolitionists sharpened to a keen edge the latent hostility against Negro slavery which had been blunted by toleration, accommodation and reverence for political stability" (113). By the early 1830s slavery seemed to be accepted within Methodism. There were several places, however, where the Abolitionist influence became evident. Southerners

¹² Statistics are taken from Mathews, pp 63-67.

¹³ Mathews adds that persons like Fisk "were motivated by a genuine concern for Negroes [sic] uncomplicated by conscious prejudice" (109).

found they were unable to elect a bishop who was a slaveholder. Ironically, James Andrew was elected as a compromise candidate because he did not own slaves (as opposed to William Capers who had the greater support of the South.)¹⁴ William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* was influencing Northerners such as Orange Scott and La Roy Sunderland who became abolitionist leaders. Scott was frequently preaching a message such as the following: *at the earliest possible period, consistent with the best good of the slaves, they should be FULLY EMANCIPATED*" (Quoted in Mathews from *Zion's Herald*, Jan. 7, 1835). He was convinced that preaching would lead to repentance for slaveholders. Anti-Slavery Societies were also formed and were influential.

At the same time, strong opposition to abolitionists grew and reached a peak at the 1836 General Conference. Mathews reports on the heated debates. Orange Scott spoke the abolitionist message for more than two hours. The response was extreme, with some delegates urging that God allows slavery and it was the Christian duty of ministers to own slaves. One gets a sense of the opposition to the incompatibilist, abolitionist voice. They were censured. An attempt to add a traditional statement concerning the "great evil of slavery" was defeated by a vote of 120 to 15. Despite the domination in the votes, the incompatibilist voices did forcefully pose the clear alternative to accommodation. Another small victory for the abolitionists was the refusal once again by the Conference to elect a slaveholder as bishop.¹⁵

The compatibilists in the North began to exert pressure upon the abolitionist voices because they believed them harmful and divisive to the church. According to Mathews, clergy in eastern New York voted to "refuse the ordination of anyone who would not abjure abolitionism" (151). In the New England Conference, Bishop Hedding removed Orange Scott from his appointment as presiding elder in hopes of silencing him. President Fisk of Wesleyan University said the abolitionist cause would end in "schism and in the dismemberment of the Church of Christ" and that the cause was "subversive to the essential principles of ecclesiastical institutions" (Fisk papers quoted by Mathews, 159).

The suppression of the minority abolitionist voices reached another high mark at the 1840 General Conference in Baltimore. In the opening address, the bishops accused them of agitating the church in terms of "crimination and reproach" in ways contrary to Methodism (May 4, 1840). In following actions the "rights of Caesar" were protected, bishops and conferences were instructed to restrain abolitionists, trials of abolitionists were supported, and, finally, the Conference endorsed again the American Colonization

¹⁴ Later, he acquired slaves through marriage and became the breaking point at the 1844 General Conference.

¹⁵ There was another moment of support for the abolitionist voice. It came from the delegates of the Wesleyan Methodist Conference in England. The spokesperson for the delegation (William Lord) expressed his hope that the General Conference could devise plans for the termination of slavery as soon as possible and that the British had emancipated the West Indian slaves because slavery was contrary to Christianity. (Quoted in Mathew, p. 140, from *Journals of the General Conference, I, 431.*)

society. At the close of the conference, it was hard not to realize that the accommodation to slavery seemed complete.

Discussion of separation within the church had begun in both the north and the south. The Southerners were infuriated by the condemnation of the slaveholders by the abolitionists. As early as 1836, the *Virginia Conference Sentinel* suggested a Southern General Conference (Mathews, 178). After 1840 the mood changed in the north as well. The anti-abolitionists in the north realized they could no longer keep arguing that eventually slavery would end by persuasion and repentance. After 1840, Orange Scott argued that he had no interest in leaving the church because abolitionists had more right to the tradition than did the slaveholders. Yet others, such as Sunderland, suggested that a “false love of denomination” was guiding the church leaders. When faced with the sense that slavery would never be overturned institutionally, it caused careful reflection on the requirements for unity. Beyond the abolitionists a new sentiment of anti-slavery emerged. New voices saw the churches as the “bulwark of slavery.” The inevitable move was toward a secession that became focused at an anti-slavery convention in 1843 in Utica, New York. The political conviction merged with a desire to reemphasize Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection. At that time Orange Scott with a new newspaper, *The True Wesleyan*, led to the formation of a new denomination, The Wesleyan Methodist Connection. Through separation, the abolitionists exerted more influence upon the northern leadership than they had been able to do as part of the church.

The impossibility of reconciliation in 1844 was apparent. While the leadership of the north became more resolved to lift up the evil of slavery, the southern conferences affirmed that slavery was not a moral evil. The formal split occurred with attempts to find an amicable separation. The possibilities of that amicable nature of the separation proved impossible in the annual conferences actions after the conference. The compatibilists in the north and the south were inevitably pulled to the emerging strength of opinion of their regions. The fabric had been thoroughly torn.

Application of the Schema to the Current Crisis over Sexual Orientation

Without historical perspective, it is far more difficult to view the current crisis of the church regarding compatibilist and incompatibilist positions. The votes at general conferences do not convey much change. One complicating factor is the impossibility of separating the sentiments of United Methodists within the United States from the sentiments of United Methodists from other countries. The percentage of delegates from other countries has grown significantly and will continue to do so. At the 2008 General Conference, 27% of the delegates will come from outside the United States. The focus of the debate is within the jurisdictions of the United States. However, the voting on the floor includes all of the delegates. There is no clear way to see the impact that the compatibilists and incompatibilists have upon one another.

Secondly, it is difficult to measure the impact of the very public trials within the United States. The seven or eight public trials have been extensively reported in both secular

and religious press, as have trials and events within other denominations. However, they have all occurred in the three smaller jurisdictions: the Northeast, the North Central and the West. The other two jurisdictions have the largest populations of United Methodists.

At the same time, it is possible to identify some similarities to the debate over slavery. First, the incompatibilists on either side of the political spectrum within both crises are (or were) deeply influenced by ecclesiological points of view. As in the debate over slavery, both incompatibilist sides of the present debate have used scripture to reinforce their arguments and have seen it as a criterion for the truth of their position. Southerners and abolitionists both believed that the message of scripture upheld their positions. Southerners noted that scripture includes many references to slavery and that slavery is portrayed as an acceptable part of societal structure. Abolitionists were convinced (reinforced by John Wesley) that slavery was completely contrary to the plan of God. Regarding same sex orientation, the more conservative incompatibilists are convinced that the various passages in the Bible (Hebrew and Christian scripture) directly relate to the situation today of sexual orientation and gender identity. More liberal incompatibilists are convinced that the situation within committed relationships today is completely different than it was in Biblical times. Furthermore, the exclusion of people from the church community because of a “sin” held up by the person in charge is arbitrary and contrary to their vision of the church.¹⁶

What cannot be measured is the impact the voices within the debate have upon one another. The report *In Search of Unity* gives glimpses how the different sides were able to listen to one another. Another example took place at the 2004 General Conference. During that conference two new delegates to General Conference approached some GCCUIC members who were involved in the “homosexuality and unity of the church” dialogues. They spoke of constantly voting against each other on homosexuality issues and wondered if a group of persons on either side of the issue could be convened to seek to work on the conflict. I was also approached and worked with the Commission leadership to respond to this request. A late night meeting was convened with approximately 25 people including many leaders representing the different points of view. Persons went around the room telling their stories including moving testimonies of the pain they have experienced because of this issue. One of the more conservative leaders, Bill Hinson, said that he was so moved with the pain that he began to be convinced that the unity was causing too much damage and that all parties should look for some form of “amicable separation.” Another meeting followed that one where the more conservative members brought a document to the table suggesting a possible separation. This informal document came to be widely distributed and led to the headlines of schism. Bill Hinson said informally that it was hearing the stories of pain expressed around the table that led him to the conviction that separation may be the best option. Those supporting the LGBT community sensed that he thought they should be the ones who leave. Like the Abolitionists before, they challenged who it was that was

¹⁶ The 2005 Judicial Council decision #1032 in which a Virginia pastor excluded a gay man from membership raises this issue directly.

more authentic to the Wesleyan tradition. Persons who believe themselves authentic to the tradition of the church question why they are the ones who should be leaving.¹⁷

Another conviction has arisen among supporters of the LGBT community that the schema can help illuminate. The General Conference called for continued dialogue about sexual orientation at both the 2000 and 2004 general conferences. The *In Search of Unity* report requested the General Conference to establish a Committee on Theological Dialogue under the guidance of the Council of Bishops. Many dialogues occurred throughout the annual conferences within the United States. However, the incompatibilists are tiring of the dialogues. On the more conservative side, they believe the general conferences have spoken clearly and the issue is settled. Further dialogue wastes time and energy. On the more liberal side, there is a different reaction. Oftentimes, the dialogues have been set to have voices representing the two sides speak. That leads to LGBT persons listening and waiting as more conservative voices say repeatedly that LGBT persons are living in sin and in aberration to how God wants them to live. Many of those persons felt victimized and have come to the conviction that such conversation constitutes a form of “spiritual violence” and that it is inappropriate for the church to continue to create such opportunities. Overall, there seems to be a trend for persons, after repeated occasions, to move from compatibilist to incompatibilist positions.

Insights for the 2008 General Conference and Beyond

I have noted some changes leading into the next round of legislative conflict regarding sexual orientation. First, the issue is extending from a focus on clergy to the laity. The Judicial Council actions concerning criteria for membership in the church (Decision 1032) raised large ecclesiological issues leading to a statement from the Council of Bishops challenging the Judicial Council. Second, there is increased attention to the governance of the church and the relationship between United Methodists within the United States and those in other countries. The present structure is full of inequities including the ability of members in Central Conferences (i.e. outside the U.S.) to change the *Book of Discipline* while those in the U.S. cannot do so. (Whether the sections on sexual orientation can be changed is part of the debate.) Finally, the number of incompatibilists does seem to be growing. At present, there is no legislative solution providing hope for the participants in the debate.

At any point in the discussion, United Methodists do seek to be faithful and to trust that colleagues and adversaries, seek a goal of authentic unity. They also know the Biblical advice of Paul to the Ephesians—that, with us as instruments, God can accomplish far more than we can ever hope or imagine.

¹⁷ I reported more formally about this conversation to the conference plenary on the last day, May 4, 2004.