

## **UM Pastors, It's Time to Have "The Talk"**

by Chris Ritter

Last Sunday morning I had "the talk" with the good people of Geneseo First United Methodist Church. Our denomination is in deep trouble. Divisions run deep. In fact, our top bishops [indicate](#) that we will soon be configured much differently than we are today. Decisions are now being made that will affect us all.

Like many pastors, I have shielded the churches I serve from many of the goings on in our denominational life. I chose instead to accentuate the positives: "Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world and we have an amazing structure dedicated to getting that done. We are providing disaster relief, eliminating malaria, equipping pastors, and growing exponentially in some of the poorest parts of the world." There is too much core work to do in Jesus' name to waste time being outraged over the extremism found on the fringes.

So, over the years, I was silent. I didn't tell them about the UM [bishop](#) serving the conference just north of us that denied the historicity both of Jesus' virgin birth and resurrection. I didn't tell them that certain UM pastors and laity set up a separate "[Queer Communion](#)" station on the floor of General Conference while we were celebrating the Lord's Supper. I didn't tell them about the [millions of dollars](#) from secular sources aimed at pressuring our church to change its stance on human sexuality. I didn't tell them that our Women's Division and General Board of Church and Society had membership, until recently, in the radical [Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice](#) that espouses views contrary to our official UM stance on the sanctity of life and abortion. Talking about such things, I reasoned, would run counter to my goals of growing the local church and keeping it focused on our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ. I was selectively mute... whistling my way past the graveyard of our denominational dysfunction.

I consider myself a Centrist who wants nothing other than to be a faithful and fruitful United Methodist pastor. I have preached only [once](#) in my 28-year ministry on the topic of homosexuality... and then only because people were asking. An optimist by nature, I worked on the conference and national level for the cause of unity. I put forth [several major proposals](#) that might allow us to somehow stay together in spite of our significant differences. Surely as smart people of good will we can amicably figure something out without disrupting our local church ministries. Right? Apparently not.

Around General Conference 2016, the tactics from the radical fringe of our church switched from quiet non-compliance with our doctrine and discipline to open defiance. Our Western Jurisdiction unanimously elected Karen Oliveto, a pastor in a same-sex marriage, as a bishop in our church even

though her [lifestyle](#) and [doctrinal](#) commitments should disqualify her from even being a candidate for UM ministry. As general superintendent of our church, her salary is supported by our apportionment dollars. I could justify meeting quiet disagreement with the same. But in times of upheaval and public rebellion to the good order of our church, silence equates with consent.

Exactly because silence is no longer an option for me, I recently joined the [Wesleyan Covenant Association](#), an organization that believes that the UMC is on target with its biblical doctrine and Christian ethics. Every church has a doctrinal and disciplinary framework. If this is not centered firmly on scripture and 2,000 years of Christian tradition, we are set adrift and are unable to throw a lifeline to our larger culture. WCA is forming to support ministry in keeping with our stated UM values. I am inviting our church council to make our local church a charter member congregation.

Our WCA Council is hearing from many pastors who have been silent and, like me, realize they no longer have this luxury. Of the 1,800 people gathered in Chicago for the WCA inaugural event, some 80% were clergy. Many of these acknowledge it is time to have "the talk" with their congregation and leaders. Here are twelve points I shared from the pulpit with the folks I love and serve:

1. **I LOVE THE UMC.** I love The United Methodist Church. I was born into Cache Chapel UMC, baptized at a UMC altar, accepted Christ and answered the call to ministry at a UMC camp, was educated in UMC seminaries, and ordained by UMC bishops. I so believe in United Methodism that I dedicated my whole life to it as well as the life of my family.
2. **WE HAVE GREAT ROOTS.** Methodism started as a revival movement in the Church of England under John Wesley in the 18th Century (First Great Awakening) and swept across the American landscape in the 19th Century (the Second Great Awakening) under the leadership of self-sacrificing, horse-backed, circuit-riding preachers. In the 20th Century, we became "mainline" and respectable. By the Mid-20th Century we began to decline in the US.
3. **WE ARE A GLOBAL CHURCH.** All seven Mainline churches in the USA have faced divides over human sexuality as this topic directly corresponds with how we are informed by Scripture and culture in shaping our practices. Unlike other Mainline churches, we are a global church and will soon have most of our membership outside the USA. This has kept us more in line with Christian practice worldwide.
4. **DIVERSITY (A POSITIVE) HAS BECOME DYSFUNCTION (A NEGATIVE).** Being the second largest Protestant denomination in the USA, we are quite diverse and have regional differences. While diversity of practice can sometimes be a strength, disagreement on the nature of Christian discipleship is unworkable in a church that names "making disciples" as our central mission. We must agree on this if we are going to have integrity and be effective.
5. **WE HAVE IT RIGHT ON HUMAN SEXUALITY.** The UMC has a wonderfully balanced and biblical statement on human sexuality. We believe everyone is a person of sacred worth. We decry violence against anyone based on their sexual orientation. We believe that our sexuality must be baptized, along with everything else about us, under the Lordship of Christ. We believe that sexual discipleship is expressed in responsible self-

control: celibacy in singleness and fidelity in marriage. Based on Jesus' teachings in Matthew 19, we believe that marriage is the enduring union between one man and woman. All clergy must support Jesus' definition of marriage in their pastoral practice and example.

6. **WE ARE IN DANGER OF GETTING IT WRONG.** Around the time our church began to decline numerically in the USA (1960's), it was obvious that many of the values of the Sexual Revolution were being imported into the church. We saw this first in our seminaries and other lofty institutions of our denomination. For at least forty-four years, debates on human sexuality have raged at our general conferences. Because we are a large denomination that meets only once every four years to set our direction, things tend to move at a glacial pace. There has slowly developed a dissonance between the grass roots of our church and our ivory tower institutions. If I wanted to make you mad, I could detail some of the controversies that have erupted over the years. My goal, however, is not to add heat but light. I want you to understand where things stand.
7. **CONFLICT OVER HUMAN SEXUALITY IN THE UMC HAS REACHED A BOILING POINT.** There was hope among some coming to General Conference 2016 in Portland that they would be able to ride the wave sweeping American culture and change our positions on human sexuality, including the definition of marriage. By the second week of General Conference, it was clear this was not going to be the case. In fact, legislation was coming out of committee that would serve to better enforce our current positions. There were troubling rumors of a church split being negotiated behind the scenes. In response, General Conference invited our bishops to intervene and form a commission. All legislation on human sexuality was put on hold. In the meantime, all parties were to be called to exercise restraint for the cause of unity.
8. **DISAGREEMENT HAS BECOME DEFIANCE.** In spite of calls for restraint, disagreement has now erupted into defiance. Several annual conferences have indicated they are creating their own ministry and ordination standards in direct conflict with the ones in our *Discipline*. In July our smallest and most defiant jurisdiction unanimously elected a person in a same-sex marriage as a United Methodist bishop. This person testifies she has personally conducted fifty or so same-sex weddings that directly contradict the teachings of our church. While there is a court case pending that may speak to the validity of her election, she is in office and the giving of every UMC congregation pays her salary.
9. **TWO INTRACTABLE POSITIONS ARE AT WORK.** Those unwilling to live by the standards of our church are just as unwilling to leave it. And, apart from the dictates of their own consciences, they don't have to. Because of how our church is structured, those with sympathetic bishops can break covenant without consequence. Many of those opposed to our *Discipline* see themselves on a social justice crusade and they will not stop until the whole church is converted to their point of view. This is all happening as the only body empowered to make our rules is becoming more global and conservative every four years.
10. **CHANGE IS SURELY COMING.** The President of our Council of Bishops admits that there is nothing likely to keep the United Methodist Church in the configuration in which it now stands. Change is coming and decisions will have to be made. The very fabric of our denomination will either be cut or torn. There is the hope that any division would not be complete and that we would continue to coordinate together on things like disaster relief.
11. **FAITHFUL UNITED METHODISTS ARE TAKING A STAND.** There is a new organization called the Wesley Covenant Association that formed on October 7 in Chicago. WCA aims to draw

together those who support the doctrine and discipline of our church and want to do vibrant ministry together in keeping with our stated values. WCA is not a new denomination. It is, rather, a member-based community of warm-hearted Wesleyans who want to navigate through these contentious times together and faithful. WCA is committed to strong ties with our global church so that we restore our outward focus on biblically and socially conscious ministry in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Here is a [video](#) that explains the work of WCA (I showed this video during worship).

- 12. LET'S PRAYERFULLY STAND TOGETHER AS FAITHFUL UNITED METHODIST CHRISTIANS.** As a way of fulfilling my vows to support the doctrine and discipline of our church, I have joined the Wesleyan Covenant Association. The problems in The United Methodist Church will take months and years to sort out. WCA is committed to supporting the bishops' commission with our prayers. We have also gone on record with our opposition to so-called solutions that would require moral compromise in order to retain the outward semblance of unity. As our denomination determines its path, I recommend that we remain faithful to our vows, pay 100% of what is asked of us, and network with like-minded and faithful Christians to create a fruitful future in which this congregation will be pleased to participate. If we are not part of the solution, we are part of the problem. I will be asking our Church Council to make this local church a charter member congregation of the Wesleyan Covenant Association.

Pastors, I am praying for you as you decide what to say to the people in your spiritual care. Like all congregations, ours is not completely of one mind. The people I serve communicated overwhelming appreciation, however, that their pastor shared with them the challenges we now face. It would be unrealistic to expect zero disagreement given the conflicted nature of our culture. You will remember that God has not called us to popularity but to faithfulness. I pray especially for those of you who serve in congregations and conferences as deeply divided as our denomination. While the days ahead will not be easy, I encourage you to remember Joshua 1:9... Be strong and courageous. Have the talk.