

John Lomperis
The Seven Churches of United Methodism, Revisited

Abstract:

The United Methodist Church is on the verge of what is expected to be a primarily two-way schism. But the denomination is already rather divided between seven main sub-churches: the global regions of Africa, Europe, and the Philippines, and the four main ideological factions within the United States (American traditionalists, the genuine Methodist middle, institutionalist liberals, and liberationist progressives). Each of these sub-churches has important internal divisions, but also distinct characteristics setting them apart. Recognizing the particular features of each is crucial for understanding how the coming schism will impact and is being prepared for by different United Methodists.

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In 1985, the late sociologist Robert L. Wilson and now-Bishop William Willimon, then both of Duke Divinity School, published “The Seven Churches of Methodism.”

Their monograph boldly argued that the United Methodist Church in America had developed seven distinct geographically based sub-cultures, to the point “that the United Methodist Church is not one church, but seven” (1985:2):

- The Yankee Church
- The Industrial Northeastern Church
- The Church South
- The Midwest Church
- The Southwest Church
- The Frontier Church
- The Western Church

The differences between these seven “churches” in the UMC were at times so stark that Wilson and Willimon wrote that, in the immediate context of hopes for growth, “[t]he contrast in expectations between some congregations in Texas and in New England are so great that it is hard to believe they are in the same denomination” (1985:14).

There are obviously limitations in making generalizations about such broad groups of people. Nevertheless, it was a valuable, widely cited study. Much of it remains helpful for understanding trends that have continued across the subsequent three-and-a-half decades.

With the January 2020 announcement of the “Protocol on Grace and Reconciliation through Separation” proposal (hereafter, “the Protocol”) and now widely expressed support for it, the UMC is on the verge of a widely anticipated formal schism, which many expect to primarily result in two main denominations emerging, one more theologically conservative and one more theologically liberal. However, even before such a split is formalized, I contend that the denomination is already very divided, into more than two key factions. In this paper, I show that while the number of sub-churches is still seven, the most consequential lines of division have become very different from those highlighted in 1985. As in Wilson and Willimon’s study, there are extreme differences in the sizes of these “churches” and important diversities and sub-divisions within each. This paper will identify the particular characteristics of these seven main factions within the denomination facing imminent schism. It is crucial to understand the distinct realities of the UMC’s seven “churches” today in

order to comprehend different ways in which the coming separation will ultimately impact and is being approached by different United Methodists.

Geographic differences remain important, especially outside of the United States. While each “central conference region”—as the UMC’s governing *Book of Discipline* calls the central conferences of Africa, Europe, and the Philippines (§1311.6, Cf. §1704.2)—includes major ideological and other divisions, addressed below, United Methodists in these three sub-churches have largely stayed relatively more unified across at least their *theological* differences. And the realities of international cultural, political, and economic variations are such that two United Methodists in Germany of different theological perspectives are likely to share many commonalities that they do not share with too many Filipino or Congolese members.

For the United States, whose divisions have primarily driven us to this point of impending “grace through separation,” it now makes more sense to identify the four sub-churches that have distinguished themselves along theological rather than regional lines: traditionalists, the genuine “Methodist middle,” institutionalist liberals, and liberationist progressives. Today, congregations in different parts of America who share an affiliation with either the progressive, LGBTQ-affirming Reconciling Ministries Network (RMN) or the evangelical Wesleyan Covenant Association (WCA) are likely to feel a greater sense of spiritual connection with each other than either is with any nearby United Methodist congregation perceived to be “on the other side.”

While I readily admit my place among American theological traditionalists, I have sought to be fair and accurate in this analysis.

Before individually discussing each of the seven “churches,” I will outline some major, big-picture trends influencing all of them.

Two of the most powerful factors that have long shaped the UMC are decades of unabated U.S. membership decline and the dominance of the denomination-wide bureaucracy—the Council of Bishops, general agencies, and U.S. seminaries—by people whose effective theologies and ecclesiologies reflect American liberal Protestantism.

The first factor has greatly hurt morale within American United Methodism, to the point that decline is often accepted as normal. Although regional differences remain, the downward trend has spread across the country. As a result, the pessimism which Wilson and Willimon observed in certain U.S. regions has now become more dominant throughout American United Methodism, while the optimism they observed in

other regions has become confined to smaller sub-regions, exceptional congregations, and a few visionary leaders. In 2017, Willimon recalled how after his retirement as an active bishop, a church consultant evaluated a Southeastern congregation, and concluded that none of its Duke-trained pastoral staff had the skill sets to grow the church, adding “Worse, every one of those clergy has a theology for why that’s OK!” (2017). Since 1984, *all* five U.S. Jurisdictions have shrunk significantly, with the Northeastern Jurisdiction losing over one-third of its clergy and laity, and the North Central and Western Jurisdictions each losing over 40 percent (GCFA 1984; Commission 2018).

Liberal dominance of the denominational hierarchy has remained secure overall, despite some exceptions. In 1985, Wilson and Willimon observed that Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary had “been a leader in Christian social action” and “became deeply involved in the radicalism” of the 1960s, resulting in “a credibility gap between the school and its traditional constituency who felt that emphasis was not being placed on training persons to serve as pastors” (1985:13). Today, a similar, widespread credibility gap exists related to the left-of-center social action causes and “prophetic” models of ministry often promoted at the denomination’s American seminaries, not just Garrett.

While these factors are based in the United States, they have global ripple effects when dwindling American congregations have less money to spare for missions, American denominational officials arranging partnerships supporting central-conference ministries have their biases, and elite central-conference leaders come to America for seminary.

These factors have helped fuel one of the most dramatic changes since 1985: the shift of membership (and to a more limited extent, power) from America to elsewhere. Less than seven percent of delegates to the General Conference held the year before Wilson and Willimon’s study came from outside the United States, which helps explain their exclusive focus on America (*Journal* 1984:24-85). That same year, the data available reported less than half a million central-conference United Methodists, accounting for less than five percent of the global total of 9.7 million (GCFA 1984). By 2019, the United Methodist News Service reported that U.S. representation at the next General Conference will be down to 55.9 percent, that with less than 6.7 million reported members, Americans’ “majority status in The United Methodist Church is coming to an end,” and, that due to incomplete records and lag times, we may have already passed that tipping

point (Hahn 2019). Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for most of the growth in central-conference delegates, skyrocketing from a token 22 delegates in 1984 to 278 now (nearly one-third of the total), although all three central conference regions now send significantly more delegates (GCFA 1984; Commission 2018).

These shifts have sparked tensions. Non-Americans have become increasingly vocal in seeking a greater say in denominational leadership and resource allocation, and in protesting being treated as children or pawns. Yet besides General Conference, the membership shifts have not been reflected in much of the denominational bureaucracy. For example, for the denomination's global social-justice agency, the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS), less than four percent of its board of directors are from Africa, fewer than those from the U.S. Western Jurisdiction, despite the former being home to roughly half of all United Methodists and including several times more people than the latter (GBCS n.d.). Liberal Americans frustrated with most central-conference delegates' theological conservatism have sometimes responded by scrutinizing various American subsidies for United Methodism overseas.

Wilson and Willimon predicted growing conflict over how Southern Americans would want a greater say in denominational expenditures, while, for the Northern Americans who then disproportionately dominated the general-agency structure, "Those who became accustomed to making such decisions will not relinquish their power willingly" (1985:20). Now that General Conference votes have shifted overseas, those Americans who were long accustomed to running the denomination have resisted sharing, let alone relinquishing, their power. It is no coincidence that many institutionalist liberal Americans (Church #3) abandoned previous opposition to schism only after the 2019 General Conference showed they were no longer as dominant as they had thought.

In the following pages, I will outline the distinctive features and boundaries of each of the UMC's seven main sub-churches today. Importantly, for each of these "churches," the constituency is far broader than those who strongly support or feel represented by their faction's identifiable leaders.

Church #1: American Traditionalists

Since the release of the Traditional Plan eventually approved by the 2019 General Conference (to maintain and ensure enforcement of

previously enacted bans on “self-avowed practicing homosexual” clergy and “ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions”), “traditionalist” has become a widely accepted label for those whose theology has been called orthodox, conservative, and/or evangelical.

The Good News caucus emerged in 1967 to provide leadership for this sub-church, long after Harold Paul Sloan’s “essentialist” movement ended. In later years, Good News was joined by such newer caucuses as the Institute on Religion and Democracy and its *UMAction* program, Lifewatch, the Confessing Movement, and the WCA.

In late 1987, in a key milestone in the emergence of the Confessing Movement, several traditionalist United Methodist clergy developed the Houston Declaration. That manifesto defended “three crucial truths which are essential to the life, witness and scriptural integrity of the church”:

- “the primacy of scripture” as what the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church calls “the true rule and guide for faith and practice”;
- Traditional Trinitarian doctrine, along with “deplor[ing]” the practice of “abandoning the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit or adopting inadequate substitutes”; and
- Maintaining biblical disapproval of homosexual practice, including by treating this behavior as unacceptable for clergy, while also “repudiate[ing] all irrational fear of and contempt for homosexual persons” (“Houston Declaration” 1987).

The second issue has faded as a prominent controversy. But the first and third remain valuable summaries for what unites this faction. Most American traditionalists want others to understand that they love members of the LGBTQ community and do not see their own sexuality stance as a *primary* value, but rather as *derivative* of more central commitments like scriptural authority.

This group has long included exceptions to American United Methodist pessimism about future growth possibilities. Pastors of many of the largest American United Methodist congregations are firmly in this camp. For the last several years, Dr. Len Wilson has examined American United Methodist congregations with average worship attendances of at least 1,000 and developed annual lists of the top 25 with the fastest growth in attendance. Analyses of his lists have found a consistent pattern of a

strong majority having theologically conservative senior pastors (Moran 2019).

This group has most acutely felt the aforementioned “credibility gap” between church and seminary. While not an official UMC school, Asbury Theological Seminary, with its commitments to evangelical Wesleyanism and biblical inerrancy, has been an attractive alternative for many traditionalist American seminarians, and has in recent years trained many more United Methodist pastors than several of the denomination’s own official, heavily subsidized seminaries. Its graduates are consistently over-represented among the senior pastors of the fastest-growing large congregations (Moran 2019). United Theological Seminary has in recent years embraced Nicene orthodoxy and charismatic renewal, making it rather exceptional among the UMC’s official American seminaries.

This faction shares with other American sub-churches some anxiety over the decline of culturally encouraged church attendance. But while Churches #3 and 4 below respond by urging the UMC to follow the leftward trajectory of other “mainline” Protestant denominations on sexuality morality and other matters, those in this “church” have instead sometimes looked enviously at the greater numerical successes and perceived faithfulness in more evangelical, non-mainline American churches.

In early 2019, United Methodist Communications (UMCom) released a national survey of American United Methodist laity, finding a plurality of 44 percent describing their theology as “Conservative-Traditional,” compared to the 28, 20, and eight percent who instead chose, respectively, “Moderate-Centrist,” “Progressive-Liberal,” and “Unsure.” Chuck Niedringhaus, UMCom’s research director, warned against “add[ing] the moderates and progressives and say[ing] that’s where the church is,” because “[t]heologically, many (moderates) are more traditional” (Hodges 2019).

While the value of such undefined, self-chosen labels is limited, the survey found key beliefs that set apart “conservative-traditional” respondents. Most believe that “the only way to salvation is through a relationship with Jesus” (86 percent), “believe in a literal hell” (82 percent), and want the UMC’s *primary* focus to be “saving souls for Jesus Christ” rather than “advocating for social justice to transform this world” (88 percent), while both progressive-liberals and moderate-centrists were much more divided on these questions (UMCom 2019).

Yet this “church” is not nearly as monolithic as sometimes imagined. Rev. Dr. William Abraham wisely observed over two decades ago, “The conservative wing of the church is itself a fragile coalition, including those who lean in a catholic direction, those who are card-carrying charismatics, those inclined in an Anabaptist direction, and those who are really pragmatists at heart but for the moment lean to conservatism out of convenience and traditional piety” (1988). Today, the unity of this coalition may be somewhat less fragile, in part due to shared negative experiences with unfriendly denominational officials and growing societal hostility. And yet intra-traditionalist divisions remain, on the points listed by Abraham as well as on such matters as ecclesiology and a number of social concerns beyond sexual morality. It is worth emphasizing that this “church” includes much greater diversity of opinions on American politics than many outsiders assume.

Church #2: The Genuine Methodist Middle of America

This is perhaps the least understood “church.” After all, it is the only one with no organized caucus or clear, representative leadership. This group has become rather unrepresented among key denominational movers and shakers, as a result of the generally more polarized culture within the UMC and how elections of delegates to General and jurisdictional conferences have been increasingly dominated by “slate voting” (the practice of annual conference members, depending on their preferences, voting only for candidates on lists disseminated by conservative or liberal caucuses).

But there are many American United Methodists whose theological views are truly somewhere in the middle of the denomination’s divides. They feel uncomfortable with the packaged-deal stances of the caucuses of the other U.S. sub-churches.

The details of what puts individuals in this sub-church vary widely. Some Methodist middlers may sometimes strongly agree with conservative caucuses and with liberal caucuses at other times, all on issues important to them. Sometimes it is a matter of taking a position of genuine compromise on key issues. One delegate once expressed to me support for the UMC becoming more permissive on homosexuality, but also talked of feeling “not yet ready” to go as far as changing the church’s definition of marriage.

Some in the other American “churches” may deem such middling stances as unsettled or inconsistent. But that does not erase the fact that

the views of significant numbers of United Methodists do not fit neatly into any of the other factions. Even if being in this “church” often seems to be a transitional phase before people make up their minds to “join” one of the other factions, such personal evolutions can stretch over years.

At the local level, particularly among laity, the majority of members have not paid too close attention to General Conferences, caucuses, or others beyond their local congregation. The denomination’s growing polarization may make such aloofness more difficult. But the majority of American congregations also include mixes of perspectives, with members previously not feeling too much pressure to “pick a side.”

When annual conferences and congregations eventually choose to align with either a more liberal or a more traditionalist denomination, it will be especially difficult for this group.

It is also important to understand that this group is very different, and significantly less liberal, than the caucuses and leaders now prominently embracing the “centrist” label.

Church #3: Institutional Liberalists

This American sub-church is defined by (1) a strong desire to liberalize church standards on sexual morality, (2) key theological shifts needed to support this stance, and (3) loyalty to the institutional trappings of the United Methodist Church as we have known it—the name branding, hierarchies of leadership, and complex structure from our long history of “organizing to beat the devil.”

In their own self-understanding, members of this “church” resonate with all of the new UMC Next caucus’s “Four Commitments”:

- Claiming continuity with the Wesleyan tradition, including familiar United Methodist language referencing the four sides of what others have called the Wesleyan quadrilateral and combining “personal piety and social holiness”;
- Affirming people of all sexual orientations and gender identities as part of a larger framework of “resist[ing] evil, injustice and oppression” and including people of all races, classes, abilities, etc.;
- Not only rejecting the 2019 Traditional Plan, but also “resist[ing] its implementation”; and
- Eliminating in church law teaching and standards expressing disapproval of homosexual practice (UMC Next n.d.).

The first commitment's unelaborated use of the "social holiness" buzz phrase, along with the second commitment, appear indicative of how members of this "church," like much UMC discourse in recent history, has understood such values largely in terms of the left-of-center political activism associated with organizations like the Methodist Federation for Social Action. The repeated mentions of LGBTQ liberation, along with careful observation of other statements from this sub-church's leaders, indicate that they see stopping the harm they view as inflicted on LGBTQ persons as *central* to their theological understanding of the church's mission, in contrast to how American traditionalists tend to see sexuality standards as *derivative* of more foundational values. The second commitment's language about staying in the UMC and fighting traditional standards from within importantly sets this group apart from both Church #4's willingness to abandon the UMC to start a purely progressive denomination and from those in the Church #2 whose own sexuality views are more liberal but do not think it is worth fighting a pitched battle after General Conference has made its decision.

Leadership is provided by the majority of American bishops, denominational agency officials, leaders from older liberal-caucus circles, and all of the newer caucuses describing themselves as "centrist." Sometimes those touting the "centrist" label and their close partners calling themselves progressive have been characterized as different factions. But it now seems more accurate to understand both as "institutionalist liberals." The self-described "centrist" caucuses, and some of their key leaders, can be seen as relative newcomers now strengthening and assuming some leadership of a liberal movement with a longer history. Several of these newcomers are pastors of large congregations (some with impressive growth records) and/or were formerly known as more traditionalist in their theology before shifting. Some have track records of supporting key efforts to reduce or reform much of the denominational bureaucracy, at times even allying with American traditionalists in promoting greater representation for regions with more members.

Given the confusion it has caused, it is probably best to retire use of the word "centrist." On the key dividing controversy over homosexuality, every major caucus and leader touting this label has been adamantly one-sided in pushing for liberalizing church standards as a central priority. Furthermore, easily the most prominent "centrist" leader is megachurch pastor Adam Hamilton. He has publicly agreed that "[t]he real issue for the

church is not homosexuality, but the Bible” and framed his liberal position on homosexuality as undergirded by viewing different parts of scripture as divided into three buckets: those “that express God’s heart, character and timeless will,” those that expressed God’s will only for a limited time, and those “that never reflected God’s heart and will” (Hamilton 2014). This “centrist” view of scripture is not terribly distinguishable from those expressed within older liberal-caucus circles.

A brief historical review is warranted. The term “centrist” was not widely used in denominational discourse until after an organization called the “United Methodist Centrist Movement” was launched in West Ohio in late 2014. That caucus initially named several concerns, but received more attention in 2015 as it moved towards its apparent main goal of electing fewer traditionalist General and Jurisdictional Conference delegates. Evangelicals in the conference observed that this caucus eventually included as key figures some who had previously been known as unambiguously liberal, but then seemed to find the “centrist” label to be more marketable. In 2017, leaders from this organization, Hamilton, and others launched a nationwide “centrist” caucus called Uniting Methodists, primarily focused on promoting liberalized church standards on homosexuality. At that time, I carefully examined every founding leadership team member of this newer organization for stances taken on other prominent controversies (abortion, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the denomination’s social witness more generally, the propriety of clergy violating the *Discipline*, and core doctrine on matters like Christology). On each issue, I found some leaders with records of strongly advocating a liberal stance, others who reputedly had more conservative views but who had declined to help conservative efforts at recent points of great denominational conflict over the issue, and not much else (Lomperis 2017). Since then, I have observed that this basic analysis remains true of every caucus and most leaders touting the “centrist” label. Tellingly, in the mediation team that developed the Protocol, the two initially selected to represent “the centrists” and the two initially selected to represent supposedly distinct “progressives” were all members of the Convening Team of Hamilton’s UMC Next caucus, including the current and a former CEO of RMN, with a common legislative agenda (Reconciliation... Team, “FAQ’S” 2020; UMC Next n.d.).

Leaders and activists of both this “church” and Church #1 have often defined themselves in opposition to each other. They sometimes emphasize that they are “not *that* kind of United Methodist.” American

traditionalists have often understood their place as in large part defined by rejecting what they see as the theological unorthodoxy, idolatrous loyalty to the denominational bureaucracy, and, to a lesser extent, social liberalism of institutionalist liberals. Institutionalist liberals have often understood their place in large part as rising above what they see as the narrow theological “fundamentalism,” destructive and disloyal undermining of key denominational leadership structures, and retrograde opposition to social justice among American traditionalists. Leaders of each have often claimed that the denomination could become much more effective if only the other faction would stop holding us back.

But just as William Abraham observed internal differences among American traditionalists being held in check by the greater struggle within the UMC, similar observations could be made about this sub-church. They have done a remarkable job in recent years of maintaining a united front against the traditionalists. But will such unity hold after the separation? Time will tell.

Church #4: Liberationist Progressives

The self-described “liberationist” faction in America is sometimes given disproportionate attention. It merits listing as its own sub-church primarily due to speculations of some of its members forming a third denomination. This possibility is explicitly provided for in the Protocol. Until recently, leadership for this faction had been mainly provided by the UM-Forward caucus, whose own plan (submitted before the Protocol proposal was unveiled) would dissolve the UMC into four new denominations: one for themselves, one for self-described progressives who UM-Forward finds insufficiently progressive, one for moderates, and one for traditionalists. They summarize their own potential denomination’s identity as “grounded in Gospel-centered, anti-colonial, and intersectional justice that intentionally empowers PoC+Q+T [people of color + queer + trans] people” (UM-Forward n.d.).

Activists in this sub-church have made clear that even limited, temporary toleration for clergy who decline to conduct same-sex weddings is unacceptable. They have sometimes decried as a betrayal institutionalist liberals’ push for the One Church Plan (OCP), which would have liberalized church standards on homosexuality, with some protections to allow conferences, congregations, and clergy to continue with a traditionalist approach. (It is worth noting that traditionalist leaders critiqued these

protections as insufficient, unsustainable facades, and that leading OCP proponents abandoned support for even such limited protections after the plan's defeat at the 2019 General Conference.) Some in this "church" have accused institutionalist liberals of prioritizing loyalty to and the desire to maintain control of the denominational establishment over LGBTQ liberation.

A May 2019 UM-Forward gathering produced a lengthy, multi-part "Loved and Liberated" manifesto outlining their vision for the denomination they want. Some noteworthy highlights include commitments to:

- "reject gradualism and incrementalism" and accept "no concession of any kind" to opponents of LGBTQ liberation;
- prioritize "the fullness of the Gospel and liberative change" over "denominational preservation";
- "create an expression of Methodism that is Christ-full and centers PoC+Q+T voices and their lived experiences";
- "actively resist white supremacy, heterosexism, sexism, patriarchy, transphobia, xenophobia, ableism, colonialism, classism, and establishmentism";
- "dismantle[e] hierarchical structures"; and
- have doctrinal standards that better "embody a theology of liberation" ("Loved and Liberated" 2019).

With UM-Forward's repeated allusions to a range of left-wing social causes, seen as intertwined parts of an "intersectional" whole, this "church" is probably the most politically monolithic.

It includes some General Conference delegates and prominent activists. But it lacks the resources, prominent leadership, and naturally aligned institutions of the first and third sub-churches. A review of the 100 largest-membership congregations in American United Methodism found only one, The Gathering in St. Louis, formally affiliated with RMN (GCFA 2018; RMN n.d.).

Another problem for this "church" is that many of the grassroots members whose values best fit into this group are among the biggest "flight risks," who may scatter away before any acceptably liberal Methodist denomination is truly organized. A 2020 poll of clergy, lay leaders, and voting lay members of the Indiana Annual Conference, the largest in the North Central Jurisdiction, found 43.7 percent taking a liberal position on "human sexuality," and 27.9 percent saying they are not likely to remain in the denomination if its position does not change (Lomperis 2020). While

the latter figure indicates a potentially wider constituency for this faction, it remains unclear how many will ever connect to UM-Forward or related organizations.

A March 2020 UM-Forward conference was officially dedicated to “Trailblazing the Liberation Methodist Church” but also was divided between those eager to start a new denomination and those still hoping to bring the greater UMC around to their vision (Hodges 2020). In late 2020, this divide became formalized with two new associations emerging from the UM-Forward caucus. The new “Liberation Project” is clearly devoted to trying to win over a larger portion of the denomination to its liberationist progressive values, in marked contrast to seeking to split off and start a new liberationist denomination (Hahn, “Group” 2020). The Liberation Methodist Connexion or “LMX,” on the other hand, describes itself as a new “grassroots denomination of former, current, and non-Methodist faith leaders working on the unfolding of the kin-dom of God” [sic], in which they “intentionally invite the full participation of all who are living out their God-given identities and expressions” in diversities such as “gender expressions and sexual identity,” “religious or non-religious backgrounds,” “heritage/nationality/citizenship/immigration status,” “monogamous and non-monogamous,” and “use of drugs,” among other things (2020).

Despite this official dichotomy, it is unclear if the latter wing of liberationist progressives will actually draw any significant numbers out into a new denomination. I have not seen confirmation of a single congregation, minister, or layperson actually joining the LMX, let alone the 100 congregations that the Protocol sets as the minimum size for any departing faction to form its own denomination and have such rights as keeping its church properties (Reconciliation...Team, “Protocol Legislation” 2020). The organizers of this supposed “denomination” have pointedly refused to say how many members or local churches they have, conveniently telling the United Methodist News Service that “they do not want to equate worth with volume,” and have even hedged their bets by talking about continuing to work with like-minded United Methodists and “not asking people to choose between” the UMC or the LMX (Hahn, “New” 2020). But the UMC’s church law clearly forbids simultaneous membership in another denomination, so that “[u]pon joining another denomination, membership in The United Methodist Church is terminated,” which further limits the LMX’s potential to realize its professed goals (UMC Judicial Council 1993).

Furthermore, there are several more principled reasons that could doom this faction's ability to launch and maintain their own denomination. If the Protocol passes and liberationists *finally* found themselves in an increasingly liberal denomination that allowed same-sex unions and saw numerous traditionalists part ways, the very goals for which they have sought so hard for decades, how many would really take the trouble to leave to start over? How sustainable will it be for the LMX's leaders to continue explicitly declaring that they have no doctrinal litmus tests while at the same time being rather doctrinaire about certain core values they see as non-negotiable social-justice causes? Given how this faction is disproportionately led by LGBTQ activists and focused on LGBTQ concerns, is the realistic ceiling of the LMX's potential to become a niche denomination primarily focused on an LGBTQ constituency? How would it craft an identity clear enough to justify a separate existence from other liberal denominations?

But then again, if the next General Conference fails to liberalize sexuality standards or enact a separation agreement, then we could see some current institutionalist liberals get frustrated enough to prepare to leave to form their own denomination, thus having more in common with the liberationists, rather than continuing to stay and fight. Especially in the Western Jurisdiction, the aftermath of the 2019 General Conference saw early signs of some now in the institutionalist liberal camp preparing to leave, with a more liberationist progressive mindset, before the announcement of the Protocol proposal.

Church #5: Sub-Saharan Africa

African United Methodism dates back to freed American slaves settling in Liberia in the early 1800s (UMCom, "History...Africa," n.d.). Now this region has over 6.2 million members—a nearly 20-fold increase from 1984—spread across 31 nations and three central conferences (GCFA 2017).

Making generalizations about such a large group can be dangerous. Yet several broad outlines can be observed. United Methodists are a major part of the religious landscape in parts of Africa, like Sierra Leone, where they have been the largest Protestant denomination (Snider 2016). This sub-church tends to fervently cherish its United Methodist identity and the cross-and-flame logo, in contrast to how some American congregations minimize denominational branding.

This region is severely under-represented in denominational leadership. Yet it is the only one of the seven “churches” with strong, consistent growth in this era. This has helped fuel optimistic expectations for the church. In recent years, African leaders have become increasingly vocal in seeking to set the denomination’s direction on sexuality, funding priorities, and other issues, with much leadership provided by the Africa Initiative, a newer caucus of African General Conference delegates.

African United Methodists are overwhelmingly theologically traditionalist, with a high view of scripture, strong commitment to evangelism, and near-unanimity in disapproving of homosexual practice (often in much stronger terms than American traditionalists use). One institutionalist liberal caucus admitted that “almost no” African delegates voted for proposals to liberalize sexuality standards in 2019 (Holland 2019).

But American traditionalists should avoid taking an ultimately dehumanizing, idealized view of African United Methodists. Such “romantic racism” has an ignoble history. And disapproval of homosexuality is a cultural default in most of Africa. In the majority of African nations with a UMC presence, homosexual intercourse is outlawed in some way (Mendos 2019:47-50, 139). Not all who accept their culture’s disapproval of homosexuality are necessarily strong in upholding more contextually counter-cultural or personally costly aspects of biblical morality. Similar things could be said, to varying degrees, about United Methodists in some other central-conference regions.

There are also some exceptions, which should be neither ignored nor exaggerated. A few African General Conference delegates have supported liberalizing proposals on homosexuality. U.S.-based denominational officials have sometimes helped prop up unrepresentative African leaders who are more amenable to liberal Western theology. Furthermore, as the denomination approaches schism, one prominent African leader has reported that “some influential African bishops, who are in support or sympathetic to this progressive sexual ethic,” are seeking to bring African United Methodism into the denomination that will allow same-sex unions, at least in the United States (Matonga 2020). Sometimes this appears to be driven less by principled support for gay rights than by an institutionalist mindset of wanting to preserve connections with the denomination’s branding and connectional structures, and judging that this is worth remaining yoked with an American church with liberalized sexuality policies, as long as those policies are not imposed in Africa.

United Methodists here face vastly different social contexts, internally and compared to other regions. African members have had the most experience with interfaith relationships and conflict. Many have lived through violent civil unrest. The infrastructure insufficiencies and government corruption in some places can be difficult for Americans to appreciate. Tribalism is often a powerful feature in social life, and sometimes has been tied to painful, dramatic divisions in the contexts of bishop elections and annual conference attempts to maintain a cohesive identity.

Poverty is a major challenge. In 2019, the gross national income per capita for Sub-Saharan African nations with a major UMC presence ranged from oil-rich Angola at the highest with \$3,050 to Burundi at a mere \$280 (ranking last among 192 nations). For comparison, America's 2019 gross national per capita income was \$65,760 (World Bank 2020).

Such disparities have fostered extreme and likely unsustainable levels of dependency on American subsidies. One striking example was the late Bishop John Yambasu of Sierra Leone estimating in 2017 that 95 percent of the salaries of his conference's full-time pastors and evangelists came from abroad, primarily from United Methodists in Germany and central Pennsylvania (Jusu 2017).

For decisions about denominational standards and affiliations, several African leaders have strongly declared the determination of themselves and most other African United Methodists to never sacrifice their traditionalist doctrinal values for the sake of American dollars. Yet some other African leaders appear to be influenced by perceptions (for which others have challenged the data) that the more liberal denomination would have more money available to continue subsidizing Africa.

Another key characteristic is that African United Methodists are generally accustomed to "big man" models of leadership, and the culture is often more "rule of man" rather than "rule of law." Thus, African conferences tend to see more power and effective decision-making concentrated in the episcopal office, with fewer checks and balances, than Americans of any perspective would accept from their bishops. Relatedly, while central conferences have a limited right to produce substantially adapted versions of the *Book of Discipline* for use in their own contexts, this right does not appear to have been exercised as widely and recently in Africa as in Europe. Some of this can be attributed to prohibitive costs. But it also may reflect a lack of felt need to publish permanent laws which could tie leaders'

hands, when leaders are accustomed to simply deciding what is best, with a broader range of discretion than in Western cultures.

Church #6: The Philippines

The Philippines Central Conference is much smaller, with three active bishops and slightly more than 200,000 members (GCFA 2017). While this is nearly a tripling in size since 1984, more recently membership has faced stagnation (Commission 2018; GCFA 1984). It faces some similar economic challenges as Sub-Saharan Africa, albeit to a lesser degree. The overwhelming majority of the nation is Roman Catholic. Within the Protestant minority, United Methodist congregations often struggle to retain their younger people and do not reach the sizes of some of what are called “the born-again churches” in their communities.

Yet much of this sub-church is rather mission-minded. In recent years, Filipino United Methodists have planted congregations among overseas Filipino worker (OFW) communities in other nations, including the Islamic Middle East. One key leader of these efforts likes to emphasize that they have done all of this “without asking for or receiving one dime of American money.”

The denomination’s presence here began in 1899, right after the Spanish-American War. Desire to not feel dominated by the United States (the islands’ former colonial rulers) have fueled periodic movements for autonomy. But the majority keeps remaining United Methodist (UMCom, “History...Asia,” n.d.; Oconer and Asedillo 2011:269-277). In 2011, a contested allegation against Bishop Lito Tangonan escalated to the point of the bishop leaving to start his own denomination, with fights over church properties spilling into lawsuits and even physical violence (Scott 2019). By 2013, Bishop Tangonan had gotten over 200 congregations to join his Ang Iglesia ng Metodista sa Pilipinas (AIMP) denomination (McLoughlin 2015:116). This was a significant defection, as the central conference reported having just under 1,500 that year (GCFA 2013, n.d.). However, some congregations later returned to the UMC.

Having already experienced multiple schisms since 1909 (UMCom, “History...Asia,” n.d.; Oconer and Asedillo 2011:275-277, 280), even within such recent memory, makes talk of schism particularly loaded for Filipinos. One denominational official has suggested that whatever its immediate causes, the AIMP defection may have had the effects of “siphoning off those pastors and churches that were most pro-autonomy

and anti-UMC,” dampening of pro-autonomy sentiments among those who remained, and making Filipinos leery of any additional schism (Scott 2019).

Theologically, a strong super-majority of Filipino United Methodists are traditionalist. This sub-church includes an active charismatic renewal movement. However, in contrast to Africa, there is a sizable and sometimes vocal theologically liberal minority. One major source of liberal influence, on more foundational doctrinal matters than sexuality, is Union Theological Seminary not far from Manila. Furthermore, the bishops are in a different place than the majority of their people. Only Bishop Pedro Torio, based in the northern city of Baguio, has consistently defended a theologically traditionalist approach.

This central conference has a unique system of electing all three of its bishops to renewable four-year terms. This has sometimes, though not in all cases, encouraged a mindset that a district superintendents’ job includes building their bishop’s political machine to help his always-approaching re-election. I have been told that one main reason why Filipinos have not exercised their right to make adaptations to the *Discipline* is all the time at quadrennial central conference meetings that is sucked up by the three bishop elections.

While the Philippines is allotted 52 delegates to the next General Conference, Filipinos have generally not been as assertive as Africans or Europeans in seeking to shape General Conference. The hundreds of petitions submitted to the next General Conference by the regular deadline included only four from Filipino groups or individuals, less than the number submitted from people in the Norway Conference, with only three percent as many members, (Commission 2018; *DCA* 2020: Section 1, pages 158, 163, 221, 222, 247, 325, 339, 371; Section 2, page 816). Of the over one thousand petitions submitted to the last regular General Conference, the record does not show one submitted from the Philippines (*DCA* 2016). Furthermore, there is a widespread culture here of electing new delegates to each General Conference. But the most effective delegates from elsewhere are usually “veterans” who have served at several, thus building nuanced understanding of the processes and connections with fellow delegates over the years. Consequently, Filipino United Methodists do not have as deep a bench of experienced, influential leaders who are widely recognized beyond the Philippines.

Church #7: The Central Conferences of Europe

Continental European Methodist history stretches back to close to the beginning of Methodism, as migrants of various European nationalities traveled to and from the New World. For leadership allotments, UMC polity sometimes treats this region as a single constituency. Leaders from all four of its episcopal areas have participated in cooperative efforts.

But the *Discipline's* references to “the central conferences in Europe” are not completely accurate. The Central and Southern Europe Central Conference stretches into Algeria and Tunisia in North Africa. The Moscow-based Eurasia Episcopal Area (one of two episcopal areas within the Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference) stretches across Asian Russia into the central Asian former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

And yet despite this long history now reaching across 30 nations, today this region only counts slightly over 50,000 members, a number which has been trending downward. With the fall of Communism, what is now the Northern Europe and Eurasia Central Conference expanded into Russia. But in recent years, none of its conferences has seen consistent growth. The other two European central conferences have each lost over one-third of their people since 1984 (Commission 2018; GCFA 1984; GCFA 2009; GCFA 2013; GCFA 2017).

There are major differences in scale. Over half of members here are in the Germany Central Conference. Each of the five annual conferences of the Eurasia Episcopal Area has less than five hundred church members (GCFA 2017). But their challenges of vast geography and government persecution merit sympathy.

In 1985, Wilson and Willimon noted how United Methodism “can feel very much like an isolated, minority movement” in much of the U.S. Western Jurisdiction. The same can be said about this sub-church, ministering on rocky soil with generally abysmal church attendance rates. This has helped United Methodists here to value their identity as connected to a larger, global denomination.

Internal divisions have often been generalized in terms of the Western nations having greater wealth as well as theological liberalism, and the Eastern nations often facing serious government repression and financial dependencies. This is largely true.

But it is not that simple. In much of Europe, being any kind of serious, church-going Christian is already so counter-cultural that it can

foster deeper levels of commitment. So, the faith of some (though certainly not all) United Methodists in very socially liberal Western European nations can be rather theologically orthodox. At the same time, some theological traditionalists in Western Europe judge such things as Americans supporting Donald Trump or the National Rifle Association about as harshly as heterodox doctrinal statements from liberal caucuses.

In contrast to Africa, each of the European central conferences has a very accessibly documented, recent history of exercising its right to make regional adaptations of the *Discipline*, with varying degrees of significance. Notably, after the 2019 General Conference adopted the Traditional Plan, the Germany Central Conference's executive committee unanimously endorsed a statement decrying this legislation as "not acceptable" and declaring that their central conference "will therefore not follow the chosen way of controlling people in their disposition and imposing stricter penalties" (Ruof 2019). While such defiance might have been legally challenged if not for the coming split, this reflects the dominant liberalism among German United Methodists, to which there are some exceptions.

This region, particularly in wealthier Western nations, does not have quite the same dependency issues as other central conferences. In some countries, the UMC even enjoys government subsidies, along with other religious bodies. In 2019, the annual conferences of all four European episcopal areas contributed much more than their assigned apportionments to support the Episcopal Fund (the global pool from which all bishops are funded), and members in Germany and Central and Southern Europe did what no other United Methodists outside America did: contribute more than enough to cover their own respective bishop's salaries (GCFA 2019:4; DCA 2020: Section 1, page 438). United Methodists in richer parts of this region have subsidized poorer areas in the region, and also supported missions in other parts of the world.

While civil law in much of Western Europe affirms same-sex unions (Mendos 2019:144-146, 153-155), I am told that in at least the non-German central conferences, Europeans have not had the same experience as Americans of liberal clergy publicly defying the denomination's bans on same-sex weddings. Thus, while many of the same theological divides in America are present in Europe, United Methodists here have not gone through the same level of polarizing controversies, mutual feelings of betrayal, and alienation of affections that have been so key in laying the

foundations for schism in America. This may make the coming schism all the more difficult here when a time comes for “choosing sides.”

Concluding Considerations

A long-lasting theological civil war in the UMC has finally reached a breaking point, so that some form of large-scale separation is now inevitable. But while the main formal separation may be binary, some major divisions are not. This paper has demonstrated how the denomination is already divided into seven distinct major factions, each with important differences from the others. Each is approaching and will be impacted by the coming separation differently. And given the complexities of internally diverse annual conferences having to pick one side, we can expect that both of the two main denominations emerging from the split will include members from at least several of the constituencies outlined above. The success or failure of any denomination emerging from the split will likely hinge on its leaders’ willingness and ability to understand such internal differences in nuanced ways, clearly establish their denomination’s basis and boundaries for unity, and make, in the concluding words of Wilson and Willimon (1985:21), “its various parts organized to witness and to minister most effectively.”

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