

Discernment Team Proposal & FAQ
Brentwood United Methodist Church - Brentwood, TN
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INTRODUCTION

For several decades, the UMC has been debating biblical and theological interpretations of homosexuality. Because it seems we have come to a theological impasse, there seems to be a growing consensus within the denomination that the best course of action is a gracious separation. Several plans for separation have been proposed to try to provide a healthy theological home for those who significantly differ in their understanding: traditionalists (those who welcome LGBTQ persons but who wish to prohibit marriage and ordination of persons in same sex relationships); progressives (those who advocate for full inclusion, including marriage and ordination of persons in same sex relationships), and centrists (those who allow for differences of opinion). Having shared these groupings, we immediately ask for your forgiveness acknowledging that these terms are an oversimplification of reality. However, they are currently the best way to summarize the opinions and options that have emerged to date. We recognize that within these groups and even within individuals within these groups there exists more nuanced viewpoints.

Several years ago, the BUMC Lead Team anticipated the possibility of a denominational separation and began a process of study, prayer, and conversation in the hopes that we would be positioned to respond if/when it became necessary. Below is a summary of some of the steps we have taken to engage these questions and to prepare ourselves. This list only includes major initiatives, not all activities that took place.

BUMC PRELIMINARY STEPS:

- In Fall 2015, the BUMC Lead Team began a year-long study focused on scripture interpretation, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit through prayer, and conversation with subject matter experts, including theologians, bishops, doctors, psychologists, gay and lesbian individuals, and others. The scripture study focused on passages mentioning homosexuality but also included study of passages pertaining to marriage and ordination. As always, we considered specific passages from within the larger scriptural framework and historical context.

- In Spring 2016, the BUMC Lead Team offered a *Day of Discernment* for key leaders in the church. Information gained from the prior year’s study was shared and feedback from the leaders was solicited.
- In Fall 2016, the BUMC Lead Team offered a four-week study of homosexuality structured around the Wesleyan Quadrilateral – scripture, tradition, experience & reason. The goal was to start a conversation in the broader community and to educate the congregation on differing scriptural interpretations. This important work continues as we strive to grow in our ability to engage in difficult conversations with grace, humility, and love. Dialogue and discernment skills are important to develop for addressing not only questions around marriage and ordination of same sex persons, but for any sensitive topic, such as those found in the UMC social principles where differences of opinion are likely to exist and to be influenced by one’s social-political worldview and experiences.
- In Fall 2018, the BUMC Lead Team offered a session called “*Holy Conferencing on the Commission on the Way Forward*” to discuss the core proposals being offered at the called February 2019 Special General Conference and to prepare the congregation for the decisions and denominational changes that might come from it. This church-wide event included recruiting and training table facilitators to host important and challenging conversations about theology and potential denominational changes.
- In February 2019, just prior to the 2019 Special General Conference, the BUMC Lead Team offered a two-week teaching series on the “*Nature and Role of Scripture*” as part of our Wednesday evening “Refuel” program. The purpose of these sessions was to demonstrate how different individuals who equally value the primacy of scripture could come to different conclusions about homosexuality (or other complex topics).
- In February 2019, the BUMC Lead Team attended the 2019 Special General Conference in St. Louis to help us better understand the processes and outcomes of this historic conference. We saw firsthand the results of the General Conference vote of 53% to 47% to uphold the Traditional Plan.
- In March 2019, the Lead Team presented a review of the process and outcomes of 2019 General Conference along with some reflections on our personal experiences of being there. We used this gathering as an opportunity to collect survey feedback from the congregation regarding the General Conference decision. We continued collecting data over several

months through electronic and paper & pencil formats. A summary of the information gathered is presented below.

- The BUMC Lead Team participated in the NextGen meeting in Kansas City in April 2019 and in the Wesley Covenant Association (WCA) meeting in Oklahoma in November 2019 to better understand the vision and hopes of the various groups within the UMC.
- In June 2019, there seemed to be a growing consensus that the UMC was headed toward a separation over differing scriptural interpretations of homosexuality. As such, the BUMC Lead Team established a Discernment Team comprised of lay and clergy leaders to engage in a season of prayer, scripture study and holy conferencing for the purpose of making recommendations to the BUMC Church Council.
 - We began by entering a month-long season of prayer to identify potential team members. The goal was *not* to select people who had a specific opinion on the issue at hand, but to select those who were knowledgeable in scripture, Spirit-led, and who displayed gifts of faith, discernment, listening, critical thinking, and humility. We sought people who were able to critique and see beyond their own opinions and who had the capacity to hold and process large amounts of conflicting information. We wanted members to have the ability to challenge the status quo and potential group think respectfully and courageously. The following have served the church in this important ministry: Brandie Bracy, Laura Brantley, Davis Chappell, Sharon Cox, Susan Graham, Laura Hickman, Jenny Hyams, Rusty McIntire, Judy Norris, Doug Ralls, and Lynn Webb. We also invited staff member Carol Bumbalough to serve as the group's facilitator.
- The Discernment Team engaged in 9 months of intensive work that included study, prayer, listening sessions and holy conversation.¹ The team met regularly for prayer and contemplative silence in Memorial Chapel seeking to practice emptying ourselves so that we could seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Our intent from the beginning and above all else was to listen to the movement of the Spirit. When we began our work, there seemed to be uncertainty about the best way forward but by the time we had completed our work, we arrived at what seemed to us to be a Spirit-led alignment in our recommendations.

¹ Note: The 2020 Pandemic resulted in a delay of the presentation of this report to Church Council.

MISSION, VISION & VALUES

We established from the outset that the work of the Discernment Team was to be done from within the larger mission, vision, values, and foundational beliefs of BUMC. These are:

BUMC vision: *“Shaping the heart of the community by creating a culture of love formed through relationships with Christ and others.”*

BUMC Mission: *“Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”*

BUMC Values:

- **Christ-centered** - *We passionately strive to stay focused on Christ alone. Following the example of Christ, we seek to live holy lives, sharing the love and grace of Jesus Christ with all persons.*
- **Teachable** - *Recognizing that there is always more to learn, we humbly seek God’s guidance as we study scripture and pray for discernment across all life-stages, striving to be both prophetic and pastoral.*
- **Ministry of all believers** - *We are a hands-on congregation where everyone has a role in ministry in the church, to the community and to the world.*
- **Risk-takers** - *Through Spirit-led and team-based discernment, we are willing to take risks for the sake of the mission.*
- **Wesleyan** – *We believe in the primacy of scripture and the centrality of grace. We believe that the centrality of grace is the root and central theme of scripture and that it is the primary lens through which we are to interpret scripture.*

BUMC’s Foundational beliefs:

- *All people are created and loved by God.*
- *God is Trinity: God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit*
- *Jesus Christ is God’s Son, and we trust him as our Lord and Savior.*
- *Scripture is God-inspired and our primary source of authority, we also rely on Tradition, Experience, Reason, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our learning and discernment.*
- *The Holy Spirit is active and present in the world.*
- *All people are sinners in need of grace.*

- *God's grace exists in our lives before, during and after our acceptance of Christ as our Savior; God's grace works in us throughout our lives forming us into the image of Christ, individually and communally.*
- *Community and accountability are essential for spiritual formation and scriptural interpretation.*
- *God's kingdom is both a present and future reality.*
- *The church is the Body of Christ at work in the world; it is a redemptive community committed to relating people to God and each other after the example of Jesus Christ.*
- *The reign of God's kingdom and all that it demands of us in service to God and others is our shared missional, vocational calling.*
- *The sacraments of baptism and holy communion are primary means of grace.*

PURPOSE

Within this broader missional context, the Discernment Team was asked to discern and provide a clear articulation of who we are as a congregation regarding the denominational questions of human sexuality and to develop recommendations of how we would respond should a denominational division occur. We were specifically asked to consider the restrictive language regarding homosexuality in the Book of Discipline and the prohibition of marriage and ordination of same sex persons. We assumed that our current position of welcoming our LGBTQ brothers and sisters into the life, membership, and lay leadership of our church to be firmly established even as we recognize that we imperfectly live out this ideal and desire to become more and more welcoming to all persons.

Since the Discernment Team's task was adaptive in nature², we began our work by attempting to deepen our understanding of our current context. We began with a goal of understanding the attitudes and beliefs of our community of faith. We did this through the previously mentioned congregation-wide survey and through a series of community listening sessions. The information collected through these initiatives was intended to be descriptive rather than prescriptive in nature. That is, we were not trying to make decisions simply based on what the majority believed, but rather to understand our context and what steps might be needed in terms of education, communication, and leadership as we moved forward in our work.

²Adaptive work is defined as leading in a situation where both the problem and the solution are unclear and where new learning is required by all the participants, including the clarification of seemingly conflicting values.

Our primary goal was to listen to the community and to the Holy Spirit through scripture-study and prayer, and to come to a recommendation about which we could say that “*it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us*” (Acts 15:28). We took intentional steps to set aside our personal opinions and to hold one another accountable if we detected any personal agendas emerging. Our objective was to identify and do what seemed pleasing to God and what promised to advance God’s kingdom, regardless of the consequences.

We held close Jesus’ teaching in John 17 about the importance of the unity in the church while knowing this does not and cannot mean uniformity for a thriving faith community. Uniformity, as much as we might crave it, has never been and never will be a reality in the church. We believe it is important to trust that even those with whom you disagree are striving as much as you are to be fully committed followers of Christ. We believe that showing compassion, mercy, and grace is non-negotiable. We encourage everyone to continue to do the deep work of recognizing the ways we are formed by our faith and by our culture, and how those influences work in complex ways to form our understanding. We believe that this difficult work can only be done in community.

As we began our work, we took time to carefully define our task and the work of discernment. We understood discernment to be a *seeking of God’s will and way for his people and a prioritizing what is best for the whole*. Our ultimate goal was to determine a way forward that would demonstrate God’s love, bring God glory, honor the authority of Scripture, and enable us to witness to the faith of Jesus in our community and beyond.

CONTEXT ANALYSIS: As previously mentioned, we began our work by seeking information to help more deeply understand our context. We did this through a congregation-wide survey and a series of listening sessions.

Survey Method

From March to September 2019, congregants submitted 656 written and online survey responses.³ The primary purpose of the survey was to invite congregants to share their views regarding the debate over human sexuality in the United Methodist Church and for this information to be available to our Lead Team and Discernment Team as we determine the way forward for our congregation.

³ The total surveys were about half written and half online.

It is important to note that the survey was qualitative (i.e., open-ended responses) rather than quantitative (i.e., numbered responses) and that the survey respondents were self-selecting. *For both of those reasons, the results of the survey cannot be taken to represent the sentiments of all BUMC members.* The survey was designed to be primarily a listening, communication tool. The results presented below represent only the opinions of the persons who completed the survey.

Although the data was not collected to be quantitatively analyzed, there was a lot of interest from the congregation regarding the opinions shared. Thus, within the limitations explained above, we formed a team to code the responses into a format that could be summarized. A careful approach was taken to ensure reliability in coding the responses. We required a minimum of 3 independent raters to agree on the coding of each response. Items were coded to represent a specific opinion only if there was clear evidence to do so. Items where agreement could not be achieved were coded as “unclear”. We believe the information provided below is a fair representation of the opinions submitted while acknowledging that coding of qualitative data is, by its nature, subjective.

Survey Summary⁴

Overall, one of the most frequent comments we heard, regardless of the person’s opinion on the questions of sexuality, was a desire to keep BUMC united and strong. There was a deep love for the mission and ministries of this church. The following is a summary of the surveys as coded by the data analysis team:

1. **How did you become a United Methodist (UM)?** The plurality of respondents (42%) have been lifelong Methodists. This was followed closely by those who made an adult decision to join our denomination (39%). Many joined because they found BUMC to be a place where they could ask difficult questions and seek an understanding of their faith based on their interpretation of scripture combined with tradition, experience, and reason. The next largest group (12%) came to the UMC through marriage, either because they married a United Methodist or because they found the United Methodist Church after marriage where the spouses came from different, sometimes vastly different, denominations.
2. **What keeps you a United Methodist?** Many (43%) responded that the theology of our church is what keeps them United Methodist, including things such as an open communion table, an emphasis on grace, Christ-

⁴ With minor editing, the survey report included here was previously provided to the congregation and is available on the church website.

centeredness, and the opportunity to have open discussion about theological questions without feeling judged. Other reasons for remaining United Methodist (33%) included relationships, biblical teaching, preaching, mission, worship, and social justice. A few (24%) did not respond or responded in a way that was unclear.

3. **How did you feel about the 2019 General Conference Decision?** Roughly 53% of respondents disagreed with the 2019 General Conference decision to support the Traditional Plan. A few (1%) disagreed with the tone and process but did not specify whether they disagreed with the decision. About 33% of the respondents agreed with the General Conference decision to support the traditional plan.

- a. **Support of Full Inclusion for LGBTQ Persons** – Although not explicitly asked, many respondents volunteered information about whether they supported or opposed full inclusion (i.e., marriage and ordination of same sex persons). Roughly 36% stated that they supported full inclusion and 29% stated that they did not support full inclusion. The remaining 34% could not be classified because they did not clearly state their opinion.⁵

- b. **Additional Note:** The responses of those who disagreed with the 2019 General Conference decision, but who did not support full inclusion, represent those who desire to maintain a denomination and church that allows for theological difference on this and other social issues and a view that the Traditional Plan does not allow for these kinds of differences.

4. Overall, a deep love for Christ and for this church was exhibited across all survey responses. Respondents across the differing viewpoints displayed reliance on scripture and the example of Christ as the basis of their understanding. Nearly all responses exhibited grace for those with whom they disagreed.

Listening Sessions Method & Summary

From Fall 2019 to Spring 2020, the Discernment Team offered several community listening sessions involving Sunday School classes, small groups,

⁵Within this final “unclear” group (34%), a couple of respondents stated that they supported either marriage or ordination of persons in same sex relationships but not both. The vast majority cannot be classified and cannot be added to either of the other two categories because they did not specifically share their opinion on Full Inclusion. Nothing in their responses suggested where they stood on this specific question.

advocacy groups, staff, and the general church. In total, more than 700 people participated.⁶ We heard a variety of opinions, experienced many moments of grace and love, along with some moments of concern, disappointment, and grief. Much of what we heard in the listening sessions mirrored what we found in the survey responses. In short, our congregation is very diverse, generational stereotypes do not hold, and there is a great love for this church and a deep desire to keep it strong. Our shared mission, outreach ministries and deep relationships hold us together despite our differences. The following summarizes some of the themes we heard related to the differing opinions.

Summary of Traditional Views

Persons holding a traditional view are concerned that we are making decisions for the church based on culture or popular opinion. They desire that we uniformly interpret scripture in a manner consistent with the historic practice of marriage being between a man and a woman and with the view of homosexuality as a sin. They do not believe enough consideration is being given to the dangers of misinterpreting God's word in the work that we have done. Many are concerned about how to explain the LGBTQ reality to their children. There seems to be fear that becoming more open and inclusive will result in children becoming more permissive in their own sexual journeys, not because they were born that way, but because culture tells them they can do whatever they want. If BUMC were to become more inclusive, our traditional friends want to know how we will define our sexual ethics and on what basis.

In general, there is a fear of the disintegration of the traditional family structure. Our traditional friends want to be inclusive and loving of everyone while not encouraging licentiousness. In addition to a strong view that scripture condemns homosexual acts, there is a concern about a moral slippery slope and moral degradation if non-heterosexual orientations are blessed/encouraged. Our traditional friends agree without question that *all* persons are welcome and loved, but also believe that the homosexual "lifestyle"⁷ should not be blessed or encouraged by the church. They believe that doing so would be bowing to cultural norms rather than following what scripture mandates.

⁶ We are not able to estimate the number of individuals who participated in both the survey and the listening sessions.

⁷ Note: LGBTQ persons reject the use of the term "lifestyle" as it implies their sexual orientation is a choice or preference rather than being something they were born with.

Traditional persons worry that they are no longer welcome to speak their views because it is seen as harmful/discriminatory. They feel hurt and experience deep grief over potentially losing their church home. Traditional members want to have room to maintain their scriptural viewpoint without being judged as “haters”. They further believe there is a divide between the views of those in leadership and the general membership. They would like more transparency in the views of the BUMC clergy/leaders.

Those who hold traditional views are concerned that if BUMC becomes more progressive that church membership, finances, and missional impact will decline. There is a deep concern over how final decisions will be made and who will get a voice and a vote in the decision. In sum, our traditional friends believe that we are at risk of going against the Word of God in favor of the “spirit of the age” and that it is easy and tempting to get swept up in culture. They urge us to remain courageous and strong in our traditional beliefs arguing that homosexuality, where it is spoken of in the Bible, is always seen as a sin.

Summary of Progressive Views

Persons holding a more progressive view emphasize following the example of Jesus in reinterpreting scripture and in holding persons to the highest moral standards. This calls for holding LGBTQ persons, as we do all persons, accountable for the responsibilities and blessings of a Christian marriage. They do not view homosexuality as a sin and argue that even for those who do see homosexuality as a sin, it is illogical to single it out as the only “sin” that would prevent a person from being ordained. We are all sinners, including clergy, and it is unfair to cherry pick any one sin and elevate it above all others. As an example, we do not prohibit people who are divorced from ordination even though Jesus taught firmly about the sin of divorce but said nothing about homosexuality.

Our progressive friends believe it is unchristian to hold a theology that perpetuates harmful discrimination in our community and in our world and that we have spent too much time trying to find a Christian and loving way to discriminate. Any theology saying homosexuality is a sin encourages discrimination and harm, even if unintentionally. This belief system has led parents to reject their children, a painful experience for both parent and child. It has led many LGBTQ persons to the point of despair and to a significantly higher than average suicide rate. Progressive members ask us to consider how we can claim to be loving and continue to contribute to this painful reality.

They argue that scientific evidence supports physical causes for differing sexual orientations, particularly the influence of hormones during gestation and birth and on brain and sex organ development. They conclude that if we affirm that all persons are created by God and are born with the imago Dei, then we cannot judge or exclude them for how they were born. They also highlight the reality of the presence of Christ and the fruit of the Holy Spirit in the lives of our LGBTQ friends. They conclude that if God has not rejected them as followers of Christ, then neither should we. We should make ordination and marriage decisions using the same criteria we would for any other persons.

Many of our progressive friends believe that 20 years from now, it will be clear that the Traditional Plan was on the wrong side of history and on the wrong side of the meaning of the gospel message. They believe it will become clear how these views have, intentionally or unintentionally, contributed to discrimination and harm. Progressive persons believe that traditional persons are sincere and well meaning, and unable (or unwilling) to see differently. Many who now hold more progressive views have themselves transitioned from more traditional views, and they are sympathetic because they know this to be a long and difficult transition.

Discrimination they argue is especially hurtful when it comes from the church, which is supposed to be about love and grace. Jesus teaches love; and discrimination in any form is not love. They ask everyone to see how hard it is on our LGBTQ friends to be in a church that sends messages that they are not fully accepted and welcomed for who God created them to be. Our progressive friends feel that LGBTQ persons will not feel fully welcome until we become intentionally affirming.

Summary of Centrist Views

Being a centrist does not mean being devoid of an opinion. In fact, many centrists hold firm opinions and convictions. Our centrist friends emphasize our human limitation and the need for humility. They tend to hold their theological views firmly yet humbly and believe that it is important to allow differing views because everyone is at a different point on a faith journey that integrates a myriad of factors into their understanding. Centrist persons advocate for an atmosphere of mutual respect. They try to educate themselves on all views even as they hold their own. and they are generally more open to change in the face of contrary evidence than either progressives or traditionalists.

Our centrist friends hope that BUMC can remain a place of refuge for people of all views. They see that we have always been a theologically diverse

congregation and we need to courageously “own” it. They believe that there has always been an abundance of grace for those who disagree with one another. Centrist persons emphasize our shared identity as children of God who are all seeking to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Many, though not all, centrist persons hold a practical theology and emphasize incarnational theology, which is often messy. They believe the Living Word makes itself available to people of every age and that each age must seek anew to understand God’s Word. Each age is required to work out their understanding of the timeless eternal God from within their time-limited, finite existence. They believe that theology of every age must speak to lived experience or it will never be fully believed and followed; that it must connect people to the power of the Living God.

Centrist friends do not like an attitude of “*I am right, and you are wrong.*” Many Centrist persons cited their reason for joining the church was “*Open hearts, Open Minds, Open doors.*” One person even suggested we stop saying this if we do not mean it.

Listening Sessions General Observations:

In addition to these sub-group observations, there were numerous things almost everyone held in common, such as a deep and abiding love for this church and for one another. It was clear that no person wanted to hurt anyone else and that everyone seeks to know and love God and others. Everyone emphasized a strong commitment to our mission and ministries and many who disagree with each other serve side by side in our mission and ministries and are in deep relationship with each other in classes and groups.

The results of our work confirmed over and over that we are a much more diverse congregation than many of us would have assumed given the traditional nature of our church and its geopolitical location. This came as a surprise to people on both ends of the spectrum.

It was surprising that some among us did not seem to understand that we already welcome LGBTQ persons into the membership and lay leadership of our church and that this is not being debated. Some negative stereotyping about those with opposing views was witnessed. We strongly encourage our congregation to actively combat false assumptions and negative stereotypes about the character, ethics, and motives of others.

We have come to see that traditional and progressive extremes seem to represent two different ways of being in/viewing the world and scripture, and both

sides feel frustrated and silenced. People across all viewpoints displayed wisdom, humility and love. It is obvious to us that we have a lot we can learn from one another. The question remains about how we can share our views without feeling the need for others to agree with us.

We believe that staying together is the highest ideal and recognize that the recommendations we will be making may result in those who strongly disagree leaving the church. This deeply saddens us; yet, out of love we will respect those decisions and pray that each person finds a community of faith to walk with them as disciples of Christ.

Finally, over the months of dialogue and discernment, it became clear that our disagreements are founded primarily on our differing views of scripture. Everyone agrees that scripture is our primary source of authority. However, we disagree on the very nature of scripture itself. Some individuals view scripture as inerrant while others view it as inspired, and the underlying assumptions of each of these perspectives result in different interpretative possibilities. Those who understand scripture to be inspired typically have a broader range of interpretative possibilities than those who hold scripture to be inerrant. Thus, two people, each embracing scripture as their primary source of authority and after much study and prayer, can come to very different interpretative conclusions because they hold different foundational assumptions about scripture itself.

More specifically, an inerrant view means seeing scripture as without error. This view generally invites a more literal interpretation of scripture. On the other hand, an inspired view of scripture means seeing scripture as Spirit-inspired but written by human beings living within a particular historical context. This view invites consideration of contextual influences. In other words, it assumes that authors of scripture were inspired by God but that they necessarily wrote from within their time and place in history. Awareness of these two understandings of scripture allows one to imagine how different people, all equally committed to scripture as their primary source of knowledge about God, can arrive at different conclusions on a variety of topics, including homosexuality.

For example, if a person understands scripture to be inerrant, or to be a timeless, internally consistent teaching without any historical contextual bias, then the Leviticus texts and other passages pointing to these texts would invite one to conclude that homosexuality is a sin, and therefore, that marriage and ordination of same sex persons should be prohibited. The challenge stemming from this interpretative lens is that we already disregard other Old Testament laws, such as

eating shellfish, lending money at an interest or putting to death those who curse their parents.

Alternatively, if a person understands scripture to be inspired, or to be a collection of divinely inspired human voices bearing witness to God's on-going gracious self-disclosure in the world throughout history, then one's view of homosexuality would be more attentive to modern knowledge about human biology and sexuality and about God's activity in the lives of our gay and lesbian friends. This *could* lead one to conclude that homosexuality is not a sin, and that marriage and ordination of same sex persons should be permitted. The challenge stemming from this perspective is that interpretation is more complex due to multiple sources of information being integrated into a final decision and the need for scripture to remain primary.

It seems helpful to add that not everyone who holds an inspired view of scripture will come to the same conclusion. After study and prayer, persons holding an inspired view of scripture may come to agree with the conclusions of their brothers and sisters who view scripture as inerrant, *or* they may come to an entirely different view. Regardless of one's assumptions about scripture itself, all interpretation requires discernment and prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit to guide us.

Some people may feel that allowing for interpretative differences weakens the authority of scripture or its saving witness to us and to the world. Others may believe that allowing for interpretative differences serves to open the Gospel to more people. People of all views agree that there are non-negotiables, such as Jesus is Lord and love is the greatest commandment of all. One's understanding of homosexuality is important and it has consequences for life together as a community of faith, but it is not a foundational tenet of our faith and Jesus never mentioned it.

Jesus said that the Holy Spirit was being sent after his death to continue to teach us, even about things that the disciples of his day were not yet ready to hear (John 16:7-16). As United Methodists, we trust the Holy Spirit to be active in the world and in our lives. The UMC Book of Discipline defines scripture as the "*spirit-inspired testimony of God's self-disclosure in the world through the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit in human history*" (BOD, 2016, paragraph 105). Scripture is a living, breathing, dynamic text that invites a continual deepening of our understanding. We believe that this means every age is invited to deepen our understanding and interpretation in much the same way we see happening with the prophets and Jesus himself within scripture itself. We deepen our interpretation of

scripture not simply for knowledge's sake, but for transformation, for continual growth in love.

Scripture comes alive through the active work of the Holy Spirit teaching us to know and love God and neighbor in an ever-changing world. This requires us to understand and apply scripture within our unique historical context by building on what our ancestors came to understand but not necessarily stopping there. This can only be done in community and through the power of the Holy Spirit for we all see through a glass dimly.

It is important to remain open and teachable and ever aware of our human limitations in understanding the things of God - for God's ways are not our ways. It is important to remember that our interpretation of scripture is not scripture and that we need to hold our beliefs with a firm faith and with humility. Scripture promises that the Holy Spirit will continue the work begun in us, perfecting us in knowledge, wisdom, and love as we strive to become fully committed followers of Christ. When in doubt, we can gain confidence that our interpretation is faithful when we observe its fruit; when we see that an understanding serves to draw all people to God, when it enlivens the Body of Christ to witness to God's love and grace, and when it brings God glory. If we become perplexed, it is important, as Christians, to rely on the teaching and example of Christ as our ultimate criteria, seeking to understand individual passages from within the overarching message of all scripture, the good news of God's grace and Jesus' sacrificial love.

In sum, we believe that scripture should not be understood as a rule book per se but as a guide that the Holy Spirit uses to draw us into relationship with Christ. The purpose of the written word is to point us to the Living Word, the active presence of the Spirit of the Living Christ in our lives - - comforting, correcting, instructing, and guiding us. And, this is most definitely Good News!

SUMMARY

Our work confirmed that we are a theologically diverse body. People of all viewpoints rely on scripture as the primary source of authority for their beliefs, and yet they disagree with each other. We experienced a continuum of beliefs within and across individuals. This reflects our early observation that a lot of people joined BUMC because it was a place where they could ask hard questions and have the liberty to disagree with others. Some shared a belief that the world needs a non-dogmatic denomination and hope we can continue to offer this need to the world. They would like for us to remain a healthy, grace-filled community of hope that does not impose exclusive dogmatic beliefs. Respondents seemed to reflect a

desire that, as a body, we remain deeply rooted in the core tenets of our faith and that we practice liberty and charity in everything else, reflecting John Wesley's teaching among the early Methodists.

Not being able to reach complete agreement has been part of our faith from the beginning. For example, when the early church had a debate over whether Jesus was human or divine, they adopted the position that, although paradoxical, he is both. This is a theological tenet that is hard to grasp rationally but is nonetheless spiritually true. In fact, paradox is central to our faith and reflects that God's ways are not our ways. This continually reminds us that we cannot rely on our own understanding. God is bigger than any of us can comprehend alone, and this means that we need each other to see more clearly. The foundation that holds us together and the central non-negotiable is found in the earliest creed, "Jesus is Lord." Our mission is and always will be to bring people to Christ so that individual lives and the world can be transformed through the reign of God's kingdom. This shared purpose supersedes all else.

The work that we engaged in taught us so much. A few observations not shared elsewhere included a desire for a clearer articulation of Christian sexual ethics and the reality that generational stereotypes do not hold. We observed individuals within all age groups who held non-stereotypical opinions. There were those among the oldest generation who held progressive views and those among the youngest generation who held traditional views. Finally, most of our folks, regardless of their age or position on homosexuality, wanted to protect the mission and ministries of our church. No one wants to see the children we support in South Nashville, South Africa or the Middle East harmed. No one wants the women at Healing Housing to lose their support and hope. No one wants those for whom we provide meals, clothing, school supplies, and numerous other needs to be harmed. No one wants the worship, caring and discipleship offerings to children, youth, and adults to be diminished or for this great church to lose its purpose, witness, or impact in our community and around the world. We have done amazing ministries through the power and leading of the Triune God for many decades with vast theological diversity in our midst, and we do not see any reason why we cannot continue to do so in the future.

Identification of Key Principles

As our work deepened, several key principles emerged as central to our work. The following beliefs and principles guided, shaped, and served as the

foundation for our final recommendations. At each critical phase of our work, we were reminded that whatever we do as a church it must:

- Be founded on prayer and listening for the Holy Spirit, including looking for spiritual fruit in our work and interactions.
- Have the potential to grow us individually and communally in love of God and love of neighbor and have the effect of drawing people to God.
- Reflect Wesleyan theology where scripture is our primary source of authority and centrality of grace is the hermeneutical lens by which we interpret scripture and resolve interpretative challenges.
- Follow the example and teaching of Jesus Christ.
- Follow Wesley's Three Rules: 1) Do no harm, 2) Do all the good you can, and 3) Stay in love with God.
- Recognize that everyone is a child of God and created in the image of God.
- Humbly acknowledge human limitations in understanding and remain open and teachable to new insight and learning.
- Remember that we are all sinners in need of God's grace.
- Focus on the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ and bringing good news to the poor.
- Take our baptismal vows of resisting injustice and oppression seriously.
- Advance the reign of the Kingdom of God.
- Bring glory to God.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATION:

The following recommendation offers a general direction for leading our church forward and acknowledges that the repeated and significant delays to General Conference has pushed possible legislative changes years into the future. Given this reality and based on BUMC's vision, mission, values and foundational beliefs; the body of work outlined above; and our discernment through prayer of the presence of the Holy Spirit within and among our community, *we recommend that BUMC remain in the United Methodist Church denomination.* This singular recommendation carries with it a few assumptions and implications that we want to address and clarify.

First, this recommendation implies that BUMC should not join the newly forming Global Methodist Church denomination. This is based on our value of diversity of thought around difficult questions and how the presence of these differences can serve to help us grow in our knowledge and love of God and

neighbor. Second, it implies that we need to remain attentive to the direction being taken by the UMC going forward and once it is solidified to determine whether to remain or consider other options. Our expectation is that BUMC would desire to remain in a denomination that is Christ-centered and theologically diverse. Third, it assumes our ongoing concern that the language in our discipline pertaining to homosexuality is inhospitable and harmful to our LGBTQ brothers and sisters and is unnecessary. We desire that our language reflect the reality that all are welcome, loved and of sacred worth in our community. Finally, it acknowledges that the UMC may eventually permit but not require marriage and ordination of same sex persons. This does not assume that BUMC will change its policies on these issues or that we expect our Annual Conference to adopt these changes. The future leadership of BUMC and the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Annual Conference will continue to discern these decisions. We have a high trust level in our bishop, our bishops-in-residence, and our BUMC leadership. We trust that current and future leaders will continue to guide us faithfully through these and other concerns as we prayerfully live out our witness.

For additional information, please refer to the Appendix for responses to some frequently asked questions about the body of work described above.

NEXT STEPS

The Discernment Team presented these recommendations to the BUMC Church Council on May 20, 2021. The Church Council will be responsible for leading the church through our next steps in collaboration with representatives from the Discernment Team. We do not currently anticipate the need for a congregational vote as neither our denominational affiliation nor our BUMC policies are changing. In fact, no policy changes can be considered unless and until new legislation is passed by the UMC General Conference.

The UMC General Conference that was scheduled to meet August 29-September 7, 2021 has been canceled. Because of its global nature, a full General Conference may not be able to meet for quite some time. The resulting delay in the adoption of a plan of separation and the establishment of a revised Book of Discipline for the remaining UMC is preventing many groups and churches from moving forward. Given the continued delays, some churches may proceed to separate, even with the associated financial costs and the possibility of forfeiting their church property.

These potential losses stem predominantly from apportionments owed and the UMC Book of Discipline's Trust Clause. The Trust Clause places ownership of

all church property with the Annual Conference rather than the local church. This means that congregations who choose to leave the denomination do so at the risk of losing their church property. There was an attempt to pass legislation in the 2019 Special Called Conference to suspend the Trust Clause and open an avenue for churches to disaffiliate. However, there were questions about the constitutionality of this legislation, and the Judicial Council offered an ambiguous ruling. This means that the various Annual Conferences were left to decide how to handle disaffiliation requests without clear guidance. Currently, our jurisdiction, the Southeastern Jurisdiction, assumes that the Trust Clause remains in effect making it financially more difficult for individual churches to disaffiliate. It is unknown how other Annual Conferences are interpreting the 2019 disaffiliation legislation in the absence of a clear ruling.

As mentioned, the delays to General Conference caused by the pandemic means that it could be a several years before local churches would be asked to decide whether to allow ordination and marriage of persons in same sex relationships. Given this, it seems unwise to make specific recommendations about related policies at this time. As our values indicate, we believe in remaining teachable, and we do not want to set in motion any course of action that could prove ill-advised for the future of our church.

Our recommendation and its implications do not suggest that everyone in our church should change their views on how to interpret scripture. We will not be dictating a single scriptural or theological understanding of homosexuality. Our work has emphasized again and again the importance of maintaining a culture where we can have differences of opinion on difficult questions and remain together in love, helping one another see more clearly through our difference. This kind of diversity has been present in the church since its inception and we trust, then and now, that Christ transcends our differences and makes us one. We also trust that theological diversity helps the body to continue to deepen our understanding of who God is and how to be in community together. It urges us to learn to love each other in the face of our differences, practicing grace and humility in an ever-polarized world.

We anticipate this recommendation, its theological rationale, and its implications will feel messy and challenging for some and that this may become more challenging when we are faced with making specific policy decisions for our church. Nonetheless, we believe this recommendation reflects the heart of who we are theologically, scripturally and ethically. Ultimately, the tie that binds us together despite our differences is our belief in Jesus as Lord and our shared focus on the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of people

and the world. Jesus is our root, our vision, our mission and has the capacity to overcome our differences.

Living with this kind of diversity requires that we respect and honor those who hold different viewpoints together as we seek to grow in our understanding of how we read and interpret scripture and how this informs our words and actions. This is a critical skill to practice as there are many complex social and ethical issues over which we have different faith perspectives. For our church to remain healthy, we urge everyone to trust the sincerity of one another's faith, motives and values. We urge accountability within our community for anyone who acts in ways that demean or harm another person. We can only grow in our faith individually and collectively when we can be open and honest about our questions and faith struggles and when we allow different interpretations for the sake of growth, hospitality and love.

We are and will continue to be a community of individuals who disagree on difficult questions and yet our love for one another and our missional focus remains steadfast. Jesus remains our center and our firm foundation. We offer these reflections and recommendations bathed in prayer, asking God to continue to lead us through the power of the Holy Spirit into the future our Lord has planned for us. All honor and glory be to God. Amen.

APPENDIX: Frequently Asked Questions

- 1. Who decided the process for picking the Discernment Team and what was the goal? Why is there so much overlap with existing leaders and why didn't it include a young male?**
 - a. The BUMC Lead Team nominated members of the Discernment Team through a month-long process of prayer, reflection and discernment, and these were approved by Church Council. The goal was to identify people with the gift of discernment who we trusted could set aside their personal views and determine what was best for the whole. Given this is an important general leadership trait, it is not surprising that several of the persons nominated were already serving as leaders in our church. All but one person who was invited agreed to serve and this person, a young male, was unable to serve due to competing commitments. One other person who initially agreed to serve was unable to continue after the first several months.

- 2. Where do those on the Discernment Team (DT) stand personally on these issues?**
 - a. Generally, we do not know. As mentioned, we did not select members based on their personal views, but on an assessment of spiritual gifts and on their ability to discern what was best for the whole. We acknowledged in our time together that we each carried our own personal opinions; yet we intentionally practiced setting those aside as we sought to discern what was best for the whole. Each member clearly understood that our work was not about what we thought, but about how the Spirit guided us and about what was best for BUMC.

- 3. Was there any concern about the number of people who responded to the survey? The number seems kind of small for the size of our church. Is this enough to be representative?**
 - a. BUMC currently has about 8500 members (ages 12+) representing about 4,500 households. The survey format included open-ended questions that required thoughtfulness and time to complete rather than being a checkbox format. A typical response rate for this type of survey is about 3-4% and our response rate is 7% and may be higher if some of the responses represent household units rather than individuals, which we believe was true in some but not all cases. Thus, we feel good about the number of surveys we received, especially considering our membership numbers include youth ages 12-18 who were not likely to complete the survey. Given

this, we are satisfied with the number of responses and the total number of households this represents.

- b. However, it is important to reemphasize that the results from the survey cannot be generalized to reflect the opinions of the whole church because it was not designed to be a random sample from across our whole church population but was collected as a self-selected, convenience sample. This means that people who volunteered to participate were more likely to be individuals who were either more active in the church or who were more passionate about the issues being discussed. Because of this self-selection bias, the results may or may not reflect the whole population and cannot be assumed to do so.

4. What was the process in how we came up with the questions for the survey? How were the questions interpreted?

- a. The purpose of the survey was to be a conversation tool not a research instrument. We wanted to offer a way, given the size of our congregation, to listen to our members that was efficient, confidential and that allowed people to share their hearts with us. We thought that an open-ended format would best serve this purpose even though it would be more time consuming for respondents and for the Discernment Team. We were not primarily interested in “taking a poll” but in hearing all the complexity and nuance that could not have been captured in a check box format.
- b. It was not our initial intention to analyze the survey data. However, due to congregation wide interest in what was shared and our value of transparency, we eventually chose to do so despite knowing the risk of the “numbers” potentially being overinterpreted. Ultimately, we felt that the benefits of summarizing and sharing what we were learning with the congregation far outweighed the risks.
- c. The specific survey questions were focused on understanding each respondents’ faith and church history and their views about outcomes of the 2019 Special General Conference. We attempted to design the questions in a way that might provide helpful contextual information about the membership of our church, where they came from and where they hoped we would be going as a church.

5. Was there any discussion about bias in particular groups that the Discernment Team met with?

- a. We met with a variety of groups, such as Sunday School classes, small groups, general church gatherings, staff, and leadership teams. Most of the groups exhibited a wide diversity of opinions. However, there were a couple of groups who, by definition, existed to advocate for a certain position and bias in these groups was transparent and purposeful.

6. What do the learnings and recommendations from the Discernment Team say about who we are as a church and how we can remain united and strong?

- a. The most important thing we learned is how much people love this church and especially their classes and the ministries they serve. Most people indicated a willingness to experience some degree of discomfort to remain together. We feel strongly after completing this body of work that, regardless of our differences, we can find a deep-rooted unity in our shared mission and our shared striving to faithfully follow Jesus as our Lord.
- b. We learned we are a “big tent” church. This means that we have among our membership a wide variety of theological viewpoints and that this reality is highly valued by many. We are viewed as a place of theological hospitality; as a place where people of all backgrounds can come together and work out their understanding of their faith as they learn from one another, including those who may see things differently.
- c. We believe that the number of people who will choose to leave the church because of this issue is relatively small because, although we have people who feel strongly about the issues at hand, many of them are what we refer to as “compatibilists.” This means that although they hold strong views, they do not feel that everyone else needs to agree with them. We also acknowledge that there are those among us who believe that there can only be one right way and that they may decide to seek a different kind of faith community to follow Christ. This thought grieves us deeply as we know that we will lose an important witness among us should this happen.

7. How are other churches handling this?

- a. There are many different responses happening within individual churches. Some churches are not directly addressing the issues, perhaps because they are not comfortable having difficult conversations or because they do not want it to become a focal point in their ministries. Other churches are engaging in intentional dialogue and discernment to be better prepared to make the decisions that will be required if/when a denominational split

occurs. Finally, churches who lean strongly in one direction or another are using their resources to advocate for a particular position within the denomination and their local communities. Among these, a few have chosen to leave the denomination. The couple of churches in our annual conference who have left the denomination appear to be facing some significant unanticipated challenges. At present, we are aware of 17 of nearly 1,000 churches in our Annual Conference who indicate that they may leave the UMC. Almost all of these are small, rural churches who are planning to become a non-denominational or community church.

- b. Across the US, we are only aware of one large church that changed its affiliation to the Free Methodist denomination and one that is considering joining the Global Methodist Church. The remaining large churches we have relationship with currently plan to remain in the UMC. Many of the larger churches in the US seem to be facing a reality much like ours, including the presence of theological diversity and the responsibility of supporting a variety of large ministry initiatives. This responsibility and the desire to continue to witness to the individuals and communities being served locally and globally weighs heavily in the decisions being made.

8. Do you think the experience of the pandemic has changed people's hearts and minds around issues of human sexuality?

- a. The experience of the pandemic has had a profound impact on our lives and on our church. Some believe that the pandemic pause was helpful because it slowed down the General Conference process and encouraged us to see from a different, broader perspective, while others were frustrated that resolution of the conflict was delayed.
- b. The pandemic caused a necessary pause in the discernment work being done at BUMC because of the need to immediately shift our full attention to the presence of the suffering and grief all around us and to the necessity of quickly and efficiently transitioning to a virtual church format. When this occurred, we had completed the surveys and the community listening sessions. Although the information was collected pre-pandemic, we do not believe the conclusions or recommendations we made would be significantly altered due to the impact of the pandemic. If anything, the impact might reinforce our conclusions as the general feedback we have received by a few is that the pandemic has softened their hearts for others. Collectively experiencing suffering and death on a global scale, tends to increase compassion. Although, there is no reason to assume that the pandemic changed people opinions broadly speaking and it could have served to make some persons views more extreme in one direction or another.

- c. Overall, we do not feel we need to repeat any of the Discernment Team processes because we do not feel the results would significantly change. We believe we have come to know who we are as a congregation and feel even more deeply the need to be a witness to the world in how to love one another despite our differences in the face of the deep cultural divisions, polarization, and demonization of the other all around us.

9. Are we kicking the can down the road?

- a. No, we feel confident that recommending BUMC remain in the UMC rather than joining the newly formed Global Methodist Church provides a clear general direction for BUMC. We believe making decisions beyond this clear general direction would be premature and unwise given the years long process that is expected and the inability to anticipate what we may learn and what new paths that may emerge during that time. The experience of the Discernment Team has been transformational, and we want this experience to be cultivated throughout our congregation as we proceed not only with these decisions but with future challenges we are bound to face. We believe that this kind of work is formative for our faith and that it brings us closer to God and to one another.

10. What will happen if General Conference meets and does not change the wording about homosexuality in the Book of Discipline?

- a. We cannot change the language in the Book of Discipline. That can only happen through General Conference, a gathering of delegates from across the globe. This means that we would be asked to remain in a denomination that has decided to retain language in its official church policy that we have discerned to be harmful and unnecessary. Most immediately, our concern would be around how to address this concern with our members and especially its impact on our LGBTQ members and their families. We would consider this in our ongoing discernment process.

11. What will come of the Discernment Team now that this proposal has been shared and how will they work with Church Council?

- a. The members of the Discernment Team have been working together for two years and the knowledge and trust held in this team is valuable to our church. Because of the length of service, some of the members will roll off while others will remain and serve in an advisory capacity to Church Council as we move forward. This will be especially important for continuity as new church council members are elected and need to be introduced to the work being done since we expect this process to take several years.

12. Have Trinity and the Village participated in this process?

- a. We have shared our recommendations with the lead pastors of our daughter campuses.

13. Who makes future decisions about marriage and ordination of individuals in same sex relationship?

- a. As mentioned, decisions related to marriage and ordination of individuals in same sex relationships cannot be considered unless new legislation is passed at General Conference making it permissible in the denomination. If such legislation is passed, decision authority and process will likely include:
 - i. Annual Conferences will make decisions about permissibility of ordination and marriage of persons in same sex relationships within their conference.
 - ii. Within annual conferences where marriage and ordination are permitted (and because in no situation will it be required), then:
 1. Individual clergy members determine their conscience regarding marriage of persons in same sex relationships.
 2. Individual churches determine their local policies regarding receiving clergy appointments and marriage of individuals in same sex relationships.
- b. Please note that this information is based on our knowledge of current discussions and could change as the process unfolds.

14. As we proceed in the discernment process, are there any circumstances that could lead us to taking a congregational vote?

- a. The UMC does not govern through a whole church congregational voting system. For example, the congregation does not call its preacher(s) by taking a membership vote. Rather, we govern through a system of representation. At the conference level, this means that lay and clergy delegates represent the whole body, and they are the ones who make decisions. In the local church, members of Church Council are the representatives of the whole and are the ones who would be empowered on behalf of the church to make these kinds of decisions. We also recognize that these are historic decisions and depending on how things unfold, we cannot preclude the possibility of a vote happening with 100% certainty. However, we deeply hope that this will not happen due to the harm we expect it would inflict on the body and the likelihood that it would lead to a church split that could be irreparable. Because of our love for our church, for the missions and ministries that are dependent upon the health of our church, and for the sake of Jesus who prays that we might be one, even in our differences, we urge our members to enter a deep season of prayer and discernment and not to push for a congregational vote. We believe that if this happens that it means we are already irreconcilably divided.

15. Who do I contact if I have not had a chance to share my thoughts or if I still have questions?

- a. Please contact any member of the Discernment Team or email discernmentteam@bumc.net if you have questions about this process or proposal or if you have additional thoughts to share. You may also contact any member of the Lead Team or Church Council to share your thoughts.