

AN EXCHANGE ON THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH AND HOMOSEXUALITY

This Special Report is designed to be read with the Special Report of December 1, 2005, which is entitled “Salvation and Sexuality: What The United Methodist Church Teaches.” (If you do not have a copy of the 2005 Special Report, you can go to www.lifewatch.org, and print a copy.) When these two Special Reports (of December 1, 2005 and June 1, 2007) are put together, the three essays they contain should be read in the following order. First of all, read “Salvation and Sexuality: What The United Methodist Church Teaches” (the 2005 Special Report), which attempts to assert Church doctrine. Second, read the first and longest essay of this 2007 Special Report, which responds to the 2005 Special Report. Entitled “What Can The United Methodist Church Teach?: A Response to ‘Salvation and Sexuality,’” the response offers a dissent over against Church doctrine. Third, read “A Concluding Word,” the second and briefer essay of this 2007 Special Report. This essay answers the dissenting response and attempts to defend Church doctrine. Read in this order, these three essays—on doctrine, dissent, and defense—can form the basis for some serious moral-theological dialogue among United Methodists (and others).

A special word of thanks is due The Reverend Laurie Hays Coffman, the pastor of Calvary United Methodist Church in Durham, NC. As you will discover, Rev. Coffman’s essay is both thorough and thoughtful. (Paul T. Stallsworth)

WHAT CAN THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH TEACH?: A RESPONSE TO “SALVATION AND SEXUALITY”

by Laurie Hays Coffman

Thank you, Paul, for inviting me to respond to your fine article, “Salvation and Sexuality: What The United Methodist Church Teaches.” As the truth-bearing Spirit of Christ continues to teach and reveal God’s heart to us, I am honored to be in this dialogue of discernment with you.

Before addressing specific aspects of your document, I will more generally frame these matters in my own understanding. Then, perhaps, we can find our places of agreement and disagreement.

I realize that you use the term dissent as permissive of a perspective alternative to that of Church doctrine. But I would like to reclaim, for myself, a stance *within the central bounds of the evangelical Christian tradition* and assert that we both, in our differing ways, dissent from some portion of doctrine in order to more fully uphold another portion of the same.

In reading your paper, I find an interesting difference in the ways we turn as we seek to discern God’s truth. You frequently refer to the authority of Scripture and Tradition, but seldom allude to the balancing input of experience and reason. This leads me to wonder if you discount these as valid means of the Spirit’s revelation to us. You do well to call us to claim our deep roots in the time-tested soil of the Church’s history; I, too, am grateful for the distillation of truth that has been handed down to us. You are also careful to guard against the rampant rule of the sovereign individual, which I applaud. However, I want to unfurl our corporate sails to catch today’s winds as the Spirit blows afresh. Christ promised His disciples that there was more He had to teach that they were not yet ready to perceive, and that the Advocate, the Teacher, would come and remind us of what He had said and done. For us to turn a deaf ear to the continuing revelation of God would be a denial of our Trinitarian faith: which suggests that the Third Person, the Counselor, has more to teach us of God’s mind about the concerns of today.

I am challenged by the vision Peter had that afternoon at Joppa when a voice from heaven told him to eat that which would violate his godly conscience. At first he protested and assured God that he would never do such a thing. But then the voice reprimanded his righteous response by saying, “What God has cleansed, you must not call common.” (Acts 10:15, RSV here and below) The result was an assurance that God was surely doing *a new thing*, broadening the old understanding of who should be included in God’s new and mighty works in Jesus Christ. Cornelius, the uncircumcised centurion, became a baptized Christian, one of the blessed congregation.

I would like to propose that the same Spirit of Christ might be doing a similar work of grace in our midst by challenging us to suspend our former understanding of God’s will for the Church and to open ourselves humbly to an enlarged receptivity of the gifts available through some whose practices we once considered “incompatible with Christian teaching.” (Paragraph 161G, The Book of Discipline) Of course Peter’s vision had to stand the test of the gathered community. So would ours. Discernment usually involves more than one person’s wishful thinking or independent will. But the faithful in Jerusalem, recognizing similar manifestations of the Spirit in those they had formerly considered unworthy of belonging, had to consider prayerfully how they might need to open themselves to a larger view. They came to believe that the same communal expectations they had of one another (with the exception of genital marking) could be applicable to the newcomers.

I believe we, as the Body of Christ, are at a similar moment today. I see God gifting the Church with men and women of what we call homosexual orientation. Furthermore, I believe God is inviting us, the insiders, to welcome them, the outsiders, in Jesus’ name. Perhaps it is indeed Christ who stands at the door and knocks, who reminds us that what we do to these outcasts we also do to Him.

Your paper finds a clear word on marriage from Mark 10. However, I disagree with your conclusion. When Jesus answered a question regarding divorce and adultery, we cannot logically deduce that He was setting forth a moral standard of only heterosexual marriage. (Are we, like the Pharisees, trying to snare Jesus with a set-up?) His word to the Mosaic interrogators was that, if God has joined two persons together, then the more powerful person should not take the privilege of abandoning the weaker one. Neither should persons try to undo a bond God has created—which is a challenge, I must say, to pastors who insist on destroying wholesome, long-term relationships of same-gender couples before accepting them into church membership or servant leadership! Jesus said Moses had stretched the Law to allow formal divorce because of their “hardness of heart.” (Mark 10:5) For Jesus, it was a matter not of gender, but rather of justice and mercy, of commitment and enduring compassion.

When I first read your paper, “Salvation and Sexuality,” I marveled at how those two issues might be held together. I wondered if one was contingent on, or a deterrent to, the other. Is salvation ever sexualized, or is sexuality sanctified? *Might sexuality ever be salvific?* Are these two terms mutually exclusive or mutually edifying? Such questions have driven my ponderings and prayers.

Salvation implies that we must be saved:

- from some harm (both internal and external enemies, who might even be in the Church);
- by someone (namely Jesus Christ, incarnate of God);
- through some experience (faith, rebirth, baptism, reception of the Holy Spirit);
- into some other realm (the Kingdom of God, abundant/eternal/transformed life); and
- for some purpose (to glorify God and help God heal the world).

Our Wesleyan theology speaks of *the way of salvation*. Always initiated by God’s acts, our

journey begins in the *prevenient grace* that seeks us before we think we need divine grace, then carries us through the *justifying grace* that cleanses and regenerates us, and comes to fruition in the *sanctifying grace* that makes us whole and restores us to the image of Christ. In Wesleyan theology, we humans have a part to play, to “work out [our] own salvation” (Philippians 2:12), in cooperation with Christ’s saving work *for us*.

I think it is likely that you would agree with most of this understanding of salvation for Christians. Perhaps we would differ only in some of the interpretations or emphases. I noted, for example, your exclusion of prevenient grace in the way of salvation. It is my calling to roll out the welcome mat, beyond the threshold of the church doors, as a sign of hope and hospitality to persons (especially homosexuals) who are fearful of organized religion, many of whom have been mistreated by antagonistic Christians for their supposedly incompatible lifestyles. This extension of God’s prevenient grace is a valid ministry of the Church to the world. Jesus practiced it, and Wesley preached it.

Your essay does not give definition to *sin*. Might we define sin as refusal to live into Christ’s Great Commandment? Thus we are dealing with estrangement from God, from community, from self—and the violence/violation/self-will that *causes* any such alienation. This does not single out homosexuals as the primary sinners in need of salvation.

Your writing seems to make some assumptions that I do not share. One is that homosexuals are seeking full inclusion in the rights and rites of the Church based merely on “love as a feeling, a sentiment.” Another such assumption is that they honor “no authoritative teaching outside the self’s own religious opinions and experiences.” These are no more true of gays than of straight persons, therefore irrelevant to this debate.

Another difference in our approaches regards reconciliation. You mention the work of God in Christ, reconciling the world to God. You did not mention, however, the resultant *ministry* of reconciliation God has given to us. We who have been forgiven and restored to a right relationship with God, represented by the vertical axis of the cross, must not ignore the horizontal dimension of helping others toward that same redemptive relationship. Spreading that good news must be paramount for the Church, not thwarted by what might seem offensive to our well-learned sensibilities about sex. Gay persons, more than any other group I have met, are desperately longing to hear that the good news in Christ Jesus extends also to them. For many who have been shamed, shunned, ridiculed, excluded, and condemned, it is not only “good” to hear of God’s love for them, but, indeed, “news!”

SO, WHAT CAN WE TEACH?

God is love, and calls us to live in loving, self-giving relationship—with *God* who is Trinity, *with one another* in covenant and community, *with ourselves* in integrity and wholeness.

All persons are made in the image of God, and thus deserve our respect and honor. In each person, something of God is known and made manifest.

We dishonor God when we violate human beings—their bodies, their minds, or their spirits. This is sin. Both straight and gay persons must repent of such behavior.

God our perpetual lover seeks to save us from evil (both within us and around us). Sin is anything that violates the Great Commandment of Jesus: that we should love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love others as we love ourselves. Because we fall short of this ideal, we need a Savior to restore us to right relationship with God, others, and self.

Salvation in Jesus Christ involves God's divine initiative on our behalf, invites our acceptance, and enables our cooperation. Violation of God, others, or self is not unique to any orientation. Committing oneself to love another human being of the same gender is not a sin. Indeed, as with cross-gender love, it may fulfill a divine calling.

Salvation may be experienced as: rescuing us from bodily harm; liberating us from social oppression; lifting us from self-denigration; delivering us from whatever bondage has enslaved us; redeeming us from the sin that has possessed us; forgiving our foolishness and idolatry; healing our brokenness and shame; reconciling us to a right relationship with God; re-birthing us to new life; restoring us to community; and/or renaming us Beloved. In working through the various dimensions of salvation, there is no distinction between gay and straight Christians. Our sins are the same. Our Savior is the same.

God's intention is for us to receive this salvation as a grace-full gift, as a second chance to live in right relationship, and to employ it for the common good and for God's glory. To fulfill God's intent requires that we practice new disciplines and grow into our God-likeness. Such growth in grace is called sanctification. Both gay and straight persons have the same calling to live into loving, faithful, honest, edifying relationships. There is no distinction.

By communing with the Holy Spirit, we turn from death toward life (repentance), and we are transformed into trustworthy followers of Jesus, disciples who: create communities of lovingkindness, learn wisdom and stand for truth, rectify wrongs and forgive sins, pursue justice and minister mercy, practice faithfulness and live with hope. Both gay and straight persons are called to faithful discipleship through the power of the Spirit. There is no distinction.

God, the Divine Mystery, creates each of us with originality and obviously delights in diversity. The Church is to cherish and preserve such uniqueness—not challenge, shame, or exclude it. “Correction” of diverse manifestations is reserved for those who violate others.

In Christ's realm of grace, our differences are not meant to divide but to complement. Distinctions of gender, class, nationality, race, orientation, or physicality neither define our identity nor determine our relationships. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28) The early Church invalidated discriminatory mores. Persons of every status are liberated by their baptism to live out of a new identity in Christ. “All people may attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments and become members in any local church in the connection (Paragraph 4).” (The Book of Discipline, Paragraph 214)

One of the Church's shortcomings (sins?) over the centuries has been a slowness to embrace this humanizing liberation and inclusive equality. Believing they were upholding traditional values, *Jewish Christians* were reluctant to allow “unclean,” uncircumcised believers to be baptized. *Christian nationalists* have banished foreign “aliens” or slaughtered them. *Free Christians* have “owned” slaves and relegated their heirs to second-class citizenship, all the while claiming (under duress) to allow “separate but equal” access. *White Christians* have “fenced the Table” and blocked persons of color from joining their churches or marrying into their families. *Christian men* privileged by patriarchy have resisted women gaining voice, vote, and visibility. *Heterosexual Christians* now find it difficult to receive into the pulpits, pews, and membership the diverse gifts offered by homosexual Christians. Each of these well-intentioned exclusions have eventually been seen as “missing the mark,” something unbecoming to followers of Christ, a sin calling for confession and repentance.

God creates us to love one another with intentionality, which implies that we must purposefully choose behaviors that bless—and do not harm—both bodies and spirits. Never is it God’s will for persons sexually to violate another by overpowering, dehumanizing, shaming, defaming, ridiculing, assaulting, objectifying, or otherwise degrading him or her. Neither is it to God’s glory when adults prematurely sexualize children or take undue advantage of anyone less powerful (e.g., an employee, parishioner, counselee, patient, client, or disabled or elderly person). Rape, incest, adultery, and pornography are abhorrent and non-Christian. In all these, what is significant is neither gender nor orientation, but rather the intent: to bless or to harm. We are creatures of wholeness (body, mind, spirit, and emotions) made in God’s image, yet broken by human frailty and foolishness. Thus we all, gay and straight alike, need the support of the Church to teach us, heal us, restore us, and bless us in our growth in Christ.

As Christians, we are to manifest sexual love as *covenantal, mutually edifying, mature, monogamous, respectful, responsible, sacrificial, nurturing relationships*. This is a high calling, possible only insofar as we receive the Spirit’s help. Lifelong covenants of fidelity mirror God’s undying and unconditional commitment to us, forever seeking our wellbeing and faithful response. The godliness and goodness of relationships expressed genitally should be judged not by the gender or race of the persons, but by these purposes and by the fruit of the Spirit evidenced therein. The Christian community is called upon to teach, celebrate, and hold accountable all persons for such loving, faithful, responsible relationships. This includes those persons with a vocation of celibacy and those with a vocation to faithfully love another “for better, for worse...until we are parted by death.” (“Service of Christian Marriage,” The United Methodist Hymnal, p. 867) In this, may we all live—individually and communally—to the glory of God!

A CONCLUDING WORD by Paul T. Stallsworth

Rev. Laurie Hays Coffman’s response to “Salvation and Sexuality: What The United Methodist Church Teaches” is articulate, constructive, and helpful. Rev. Coffman’s response indeed operates, to a large extent, “*within the central bounds of the evangelical Christian tradition*,” as she claims. Furthermore, her response demonstrates some of the very best aspects of the Wesleyan construction of the Christian faith.

A FULLER PICTURE

In eight different ways, Rev. Coffman paints a fuller picture of United Methodist teaching on salvation and sexuality than the original essay sketched. First, her response correctly notes that the original essay, while focusing on Scripture and Tradition, deemphasizes experience and reason. This de-emphasis is probably due to the essay’s attempt to uncover what The United Methodist Church, as the *Church* teaching *doctrine*, can and should propose about salvation and sexuality. While “Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine” (The Book of Discipline [2004], Paragraph 104, p. 78), it should not erase the contributions of experience and reason. Indeed, experience and reason can and should assist in seeking the best understanding of the Bible. An attempt to compensate for this neglect appears in the pastoral report offered below.

Second, the response recalls the early Church’s expanding missionary outreach. The Book of Acts, in general, and the vision given to Peter, in particular, tell of God leading the early Church to begin evangelizing Gentiles. Likewise, the Church today is divinely charged to proclaim and practice the Gospel throughout all the world.

Third, the response recognizes the essential role that prevenient grace plays in the order of salvation. Given the deep corruption of humanity by original sin, God's gift of prevenient grace is absolutely necessary for salvation, for deliverance, to become possible and real.

Fourth, the response rightly claims that today's "religion of the sovereign self" is seductive to all people. No doubt.

Fifth, the response makes clear that the way of salvation leads people into the ministry of reconciliation that reaches out to all the world. Amen.

Sixth, the response acknowledges that the Church is a diverse, not homogeneous, community. This is true in theory, and it should be true in practice.

Seventh, the response recognizes the Church's sins against inclusivity (or better, hospitality) through the ages. Discriminations with varying degrees of viciousness and violence have indeed excluded various peoples, for whom Christ died, from the Church.

Eighth, the response elaborates on the many abuses of God's gift of human sexuality. All such abuses compromise the dignity of the human person; and all such abusers stand in need of God's forgiveness and await God's transforming power.

These eight contributions, from Rev. Coffman's response, help to deepen and widen our understanding of The United Methodist Church's teaching on salvation and sexuality. While issue could be taken with specific claims contained within these general contributions, the contributions are constructive additions to the argument of the original essay.

THAT ONE POINT

Rev. Coffman's response to the original essay consistently dissents from United Methodist teaching on one, crucial point: homosexual practice. Again, The United Methodist Church believes that "[homosexual] practice is incompatible with Christian teaching." (The Book of Discipline [2004], Paragraph 161G) While recognizing "the gospel that levels all of us before a holy God" (Richard B. Hays, Moral Vision of the New Testament, p. 389), The United Methodist Church accepts St. Paul's description of homosexual practice as one sin among many sins (Romans 1:24-32). Foundational for The United Methodist Church's teaching on homosexual practice, the pertinent verses of Romans 1 are recognized as consistent with other Biblical passages: Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, I Corinthians 6:9-11, I Timothy 1:10, and Acts 15:28-29. Understanding homosexual practice as sin, United Methodism joins the ecumenical consensus, historically through the ages and presently across the communions, on this moral-theological truth.

In her response, Rev. Coffman claims: "Your work did not give definition to 'sin.'" That is worthy of an extended reply.

Sin, the Church believes, is humanity's rebellion (Genesis 3) that leads to a broken relationship with God. That is, humanity's rebellion results in "man [being] very far gone from original righteousness..." (Articles of Religion, VII) or humanity out of relationship with God. Being out of a right relationship with God due to original sin, real people commit real sins. Again, original *sin* leads to actual *sins*. The kinds of sins people commit are many and diverse. People commit sins of anger and greed, drunkenness and drug abuse, pride and sloth, false witness and adultery, and on and on. The sins related to sexuality are certainly not the only sins of humanity, nor are they necessarily the worst sins. But sexual sins are sins; and according to Biblical and traditional teaching, one of the sexual sins is homosexual practice.

If the Church believes and teaches that homosexual practice is outside the boundaries of Christian conduct, how should the Church respond to those involved in homosexual practice? The same way the Church responds to those involved in all other sins. The Church reaches out, in loving hospitality, to all people, all of whom are involved in sins. The Church invites all sinners into its fellowship, into the community gathered and formed by the Gospel, for forgiveness and transformation. Furthermore, the Church receives into its membership all who are willing to be baptized, to take the baptismal vows, to hear patiently and seriously the Church's preaching and teaching, and to be transformed by God's grace in an instant and/or over time. (If one is unwilling at any of these points, one thereby excludes oneself from church membership.) Again, the Church does not have a hidden litmus test for membership. Since Christ died for the sins of the world, all of us sinners are invited into church membership, as long as we are willing to feel the baptismal waters, enter the baptismal covenant, and experience Christian instruction, forgiveness, and transformation.

A PASTORAL REPORT

Consider this very sad, but instructive, story from life in the local church. Years ago a faithful United Methodist family welcomed another son into its midst. This much loved son was baptized into Christ and raised in a local church and in the Church's faith. In due course, he attended a nearby university. While a university student, he began engaging in homosexual practice, though he could have been experimenting with such practice before his collegiate years. After graduation, his career accomplishments became notable, and his homosexual activity continued.

After a number of years passed, this young man was discovered to have contracted HIV/AIDS. Lacking the medicines that now treat those with HIV/AIDS, he experienced an immediate worsening of symptoms and a steep decline in health. Soon he was admitted into a hospital far away from his home. Later, he was transferred to a hospital closer to the home of his mother and father. His parents and family loved and cared for him until his last breath. The young man's funeral service, which celebrated the many signs of God's grace in his life and which offered his soul to God's mercies, was held in his home church.

Several weeks after the funeral had taken place, the deceased's parents and pastor sat on their back porch and discussed the greatest loss of their lives. With tears in their eyes, the parents spoke, again and again, of their great love for their son. At the same time, they stated with resolve that, with the Church, they believed that homosexual practice was wrong and that they did not want the Church to change its teaching on this matter. The parents deeply loved their son and, at the same time, believed very strongly in the truth of the Church's teaching on homosexual practice.

This pastoral experience brings to mind a statement from Martin Luther: "If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except that little point which the world...[is] at the moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point."

In our day, like it or not, "the battle rages" in The United Methodist Church—and across the Church catholic—over the matter of homosexual practice. To the dissent from the Church's faith, that claims that homosexual practice is morally acceptable, the Church replies No. Standing on its historic faith (which has Biblical, traditional, doctrinal, and moral layers), the Church humbly maintains that homosexual practice is sin and that claims to the contrary are false. The Church does

this, in the service of Jesus Christ and the Gospel, to offer the joy of salvation (including the gifts of forgiveness and transformation) to the world.

WHAT IF?

It might be helpful to consider the possibility of The United Methodist Church, through a vote at a future General Conference, changing its teaching on homosexual practice. If United Methodism would recognize homosexual practice as morally legitimate, if United Methodism would change that one point of teaching, much would be affected. For starters, United Methodists would have to interpret the Bible in a novel way. Experience and reason would have become free-standing sources, separate from Scripture, of theological truth that could be tapped at will. If experience and reason were accepted as free-standing sources of theological truth, this would call into question the Bible “as the true rule and guide for faith and practice” (The Confession of Faith, Article IV) in The United Methodist Church. To accommodate a revised understanding of homosexual practice, the Social Principles’ teaching on human sexuality would have to change. Furthermore, the denomination’s teaching on, and practice of, marriage would have to be altered to allow for same-sex unions and/or “marriages.” The denomination’s practices and requirements surrounding church membership and ordination would have to be adjusted. With revised moral teaching on homosexual practice, the General Board of Church and Society and perhaps other general boards/agencies/divisions would probably establish new alliances and coalitions with various pro-homosexual groups for political advocacy in the general society. A General Conference acceptance of homosexual practice would also increase the moral tensions throughout, and the probability of schism within, The United Methodist Church. Furthermore, it would impede, if not interrupt, ecumenical progress with the Roman Catholic Church and more evangelical denominations. Again, some or all of the above might well result from United Methodism changing its teaching on that one point: homosexual practice. This reminds us that the Church’s apostolic faith is a coherent whole: changing one seemingly insignificant part of the Church’s faith can wind up changing the whole faith and its practice.

Generation after generation, the Church attempts to propose, in truth and love, the whole faith to the whole world. The churches of each time and place, including The United Methodist Church of today, are not free to alter the truths of the faith to try to make the faith more acceptable and accessible to the world and to some Christians. So the Church preaches, teaches, and practices the same faith, the same Gospel, through the ages and around the world. This Gospel that is preached, taught, and practiced is, in part, about salvation and sexuality. Pope John Paul II called this Gospel “the Gospel of Life.” Why? Because the Gospel of Life—when preached and practiced, when trusted and obeyed—helps human lives to flourish, as God intends, in this life and in the life to come.

If you would like a booklet of the aforementioned two Special Reports—which is entitled “Doctrine, Dissent, and Defense: A Conversation on The United Methodist Church and Homosexuality”—please send a request and a dollar to: St. Peter’s United Methodist Church/111 Hodges Street/Morehead City, NC 28557.