

## A Way Forward for St. Paul's: The Collective Wisdom of 75

The United Methodist Church, world-wide and here in the U.S., is now embroiled in controversy surrounding language about sexuality in the *Book of Discipline*. Local churches will not escape the necessity of making their own decisions.

To help prepare for these choices, seventy-five of us, ages eleven into the nineties, met May 19, 2018, in Heavener Hall for prayer, song, lunch, and a nourishing exchange of ideas and perspectives. Nearly four hours of fast-paced activity – back and forth between ten break-out groups and all of us together – suggested a plausible way forward at St. Paul's. We were trying to fathom and report what we thought people at St. Paul's might be thinking. It was the diversity of belief and thought in the congregation that mattered, not personal beliefs and opinions.

Although the gathering reflected a wide range of ages, genders, and years at St. Paul's, reflecting all of us across ages, gender, and years at St. Paul's, we were not a duly representative body. We could not make recommendations, much less decisions on behalf of the congregation. Still, our deliberations were widely offered, deeply discussed, and actively focused on three guiding questions before us. If this gathering's seventy-five participants have taken the accurate pulse of our whole congregation – and we do not know whether this is true – there is a great deal more that unites us in belief and practice than can divide us on the particular questions of sexuality and the church.

The gathering addressed three questions, listed below. Of the many answers that were suggested, this summary presents only those that the gathering considered to be the most widely shared in the congregation. Attachments containing further details about our process are available for download at [stpaulsk.org/community/wayforward](http://stpaulsk.org/community/wayforward), or by contacting the church office.

Here are the three over-arching questions.

1. As Christians and United Methodists, what do different people at St. Paul's believe? Among these varying beliefs, which ones would all of us at St. Paul's agree on? In other words, what is the shared bedrock of our faith?
2. What concerning human sexuality and our church might members of St. Paul's disagree about?
3. Of the different ways decisions are made at St. Paul's, what might be a good way to proceed when choices related to human sexuality arise?

And here are the answers that we considered the most widely shared in the congregation.

### Question 1: What do all people at St. Paul's likely believe about...?

#### 1. What does everyone at St. Paul's likely believe about God's relationship to us?

- God is love
- God loves everyone
- God is creator
- God is protector and refuge
- God forgives
- God desires an intimate connection with us
- God is Savior

2. What does everyone at St. Paul's likely believe about the Bible? (The group recognized that several of these beliefs may not be mutually compatible and hence are likely held by different people in the congregation.)

- The Bible is inspired by God
- The Bible is the Word of God
- The Bible is a tool of faith, a guideline for our lives that was influenced by the times it was written
- The meaning of the Bible never changes and should be interpreted literally

#### 3. What does everyone at St. Paul's likely believe about the Wesleyan tradition of faith?

- The “Wesleyan quadrilateral” as the basis for faith: scripture, reason, tradition, and experience
  - Wesleyan methodology: service, prayer, small groups, outreach, discipline, music, witness, personal relationship with God, grace
4. What does everyone at St. Paul’s likely believe about worship?
- Worship is needed to reaffirm our faith
  - Worship builds community
  - Worship informs our understanding and educates
  - Worship brings us into a loving relationship with God and each other
5. What does everyone at St. Paul’s likely believe about how St. Paul’s people aspire to relate to each other?
- We aspire to be welcoming
  - We aspire to exhibit love and compassion
  - We aspire to respect each other and not pass judgement on each other
6. What does everyone at St. Paul’s likely believe about how St. Paul’s people should relate to people “different” from us?
- We should welcome, love, and accept all people, no matter how different from us
  - We should practice the Golden Rule
  - We should recognize that people are different in very many ways.
  - We should practice outreach — outside the church
  - Some people are more inviting than others

**Question 2: What may be our areas of disagreement?**

- Is everyone created in God’s image?
- Is homosexuality prohibited by the Bible?
- How should our Christian education teach about gender and sexuality to adults and kids?
- How should the church communicate our beliefs and practice to the community?
- Should we just kick this decision down to the youth as they come of age?

**Question 3: How should we at St. Paul’s make decisions about this?**

(In descending order of agreement)

- Vote of the congregation including youth at an appropriate forum with appropriate procedures
- Church Council
- Follow directives or guidance of the Baltimore-Washington Conference
- Follow directives or guidance of the General (worldwide) Conference

The group’s general agreement on how to make these decisions is encouraging. Going forward, almost everyone reported in the evaluation exercise that they wish to stay informed about relevant deliberations in the greater church. This seems a strong foundation.

Bill Butz and Emily Sama-Miller, organizers  
 Breakout group facilitators were Meg Baker, Alison Clark, Jay Codner, Rich Higgins, Steve Lillie, Martha Lipscomb, Phil Rush, Ray Ruskin, Susan Schwarz, Micah Smartt, and Travis Stalcup.