

United Methodist Church Announces Plan to Split Over Same-Sex Marriage

Under an agreement to be voted on in May, a new “traditionalist Methodist” denomination would continue to ban same-sex marriage and gay and lesbian clergy.

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A group of leaders of the United Methodist Church, the second-largest Protestant denomination in the United States, announced on Friday a plan that would formally split the church, citing “fundamental differences” over same-sex marriage after years of division.

The plan would sunder a denomination with 13 million members globally — roughly half of them in the United States — and create at least one new “traditionalist Methodist” denomination that would continue to ban same-sex marriage as well as the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy.

It seems likely that the majority of the denomination’s churches in the United States would remain in the existing United Methodist Church, which would become a more liberal-leaning institution as conservative congregations worldwide depart.

A separation in the Methodist church, a denomination long home to a varied mix of left and right, had been brewing for years, if not decades. It had become widely seen as likely after a contentious general conference in St. Louis last February, when 53 percent of church leaders and lay members voted to tighten the ban on same-sex marriage, declaring that “the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.”

“We tried to look for ways that we could gracefully live together with all our differences,” Bishop Cynthia Fierro Harvey of Louisiana said. After last year’s conference, she said, “it just didn’t look like that was even possible anymore.”

In the months following, Bishop Harvey and 15 other church representatives came together in an informal committee that determined separation was “the best means to resolve our differences, allowing each part of the church to remain true to its theological understanding.”

The United Methodist Church is only the latest denomination to be roiled with intense and exhausting theological disputes over the place of L.G.B.T. members and clergy. Such fights have led to an exodus of congregations from Presbyterian and Episcopal churches in recent

years, and pushed young evangelicals and Catholics to leave the pews as well.

Representatives from the Methodists' wide-ranging factions, including church leaders from Europe, Africa, the Philippines and the United States, hammered out the separation plan during three two-day mediation sessions held at law offices in Washington. The negotiations largely centered on how to allocate the church's significant financial assets and how to craft a separation process.

Once the agreement is written in more granular detail, it must be approved when the denomination meets for its global conference in Minneapolis in May. The initial response from some conservatives and liberals after the announcement suggests its passage is likely.

"The solution that we received is a welcome relief to the conflict we have been experiencing," said the Rev. Tom Berlin, who represented groups that opposed discrimination against L.G.B.T. people in the mediation. "I am very encouraged that the United Methodist Church found a way to offer a resolution to a long conflict."

Conservatives, who seemed to have the upper hand after the vote tightening a ban on same-sex marriage, would get \$25 million once their new denomination is formed and incorporated. All current clergy and lay employees of the denomination, even if they affiliate with the traditionalists, will get to keep their pension plans.

"It is not everything that we would have hoped for, but we think it is a good agreement that gets us out of the decades-long conflict that we have experienced and enables us to focus on ministry in a positive way," said Tom Lambrecht, vice president of Good News, one of the conservative groups.

The factions agreed to allocate \$39 million to support "communities historically marginalized by the sin of racism," according to the agreement. That sum includes \$13 million the traditionalists contributed instead of receiving as part of their portion.

Despite the deep doctrinal disputes that led to the split, the negotiations were "largely secular: process, governance, finances," said Kenneth R. Feinberg, the lawyer who helped craft the thorny settlements that arose from the 2010 BP oil spill and the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"I'm the last person in the world who's going to help the parties resolve their doctrinal differences," said Mr. Feinberg, who assisted in the church's mediation on a pro bono basis.

Local churches will choose whether to join any new traditionalist denomination or remain in the United Methodist Church. Several people interviewed on Friday believed that most American churches would stay, though there has not been any formal survey.

While a plurality of American Methodists consider themselves conservative, according to the Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study in 2014, six in 10 believe that homosexuality should be accepted and nearly half favor same-sex marriage.

At many of the church's regional conferences this past summer — in states like Florida, Georgia and Texas — members responded to last year's vote by electing delegates for the upcoming global conference who largely supported including gays and lesbians in the full life of the church.

"There was a clear message; it is almost like what happened in St. Louis was not reflective of the majority in the United States," Bishop Kenneth H. Carter of Florida, the president of the church's Council of Bishops and a member of the mediation team, said of the response to last year's vote. "That church just awakened."

Methodism in the United States dates to the early 1700s, with a long history of valuing local congregations over a top-down structure. It has split many times, most notably over slavery before the Civil War. Membership is varied demographically and politically, counting as adherents everyone from Hillary Clinton to Jeff Sessions.

Americans make up a diminishing share of the United Methodist Church's global membership, and are projected to soon be a minority, if they are not already.

While they are leaving the church, congregations overseas are growing rapidly, particularly in Africa; there are nearly 3 million members in Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo. These groups tend to be more conservative than the typical American Methodist, which in part explains the vote in St. Louis, where more than 40 percent of delegates were from outside the United States.

Bishop Carter, the president of the Council of Bishops, said that while he had long advocated unity of the church, his own thinking shifted during the mediation process.

"It could not be a unity at someone's expense," Bishop Carter said. "There is a kind of unity that oppresses persons. It was just as obvious as we went along that we were going to look structurally different in the future."

Though the traditionalists won the narrow vote in 2019, it is the progressives who will remain under the banner of the United Methodist Church. This was a topic of extensive conversation among the committee, Bishop Harvey said, though she said the conservatives seemed as if they had been making preparations to leave for some time.

The Wesleyan Covenant Association, a more conservative network of orthodox Methodist laity, clergy and churches, had been preparing for such a contingency for years, said its president, the Rev. Keith Boyette.

“People of all theological perspectives have grown very weary of the conflict and don’t have a vision for how it can end,” he said. And while he profoundly disagrees with the “centrists and progressives” on certain matters, he said, people cannot be compelled to leave the Methodist church. So the traditionalists are agreeing to do so voluntarily.

“I believe that our witness and message is much more important than a name,” he said, estimating that about a third of American churches could follow.

For those remaining, the future already looks different. After the vote last year to disallow gay clergy, candidates for ordination like Chet Jechura were devastated. Mr. Jechura, 30, who recently became engaged to his boyfriend and who serves at Foundry United Methodist in Washington, first felt the call to preach when he was 12, and he had spent years trying to find a church that would fully accept him.

When the plan was released on Friday, Mr. Jechura read it carefully and decided to take time to reflect on what it all meant. He thought of the spiritual practice he has started with his fiancé: naming one hope or joy every morning.

This day, he said, “I do feel hope for the people called Methodist.”