

What in the World is Going on in the UMC?

December, 1944: in the final months of World War Two, a Japanese lieutenant named Hiroo Onoda was stationed on Lubang, a tiny island in the Philippines. Within weeks of his arrival, a US attack forced Japanese combatants into the jungle – but unlike most of his comrades, Onoda remained hidden on the island for nearly 30 years. The Japanese government declared him dead in 1959, but he was alive – committed to a secret mission that had instructed him to hold the island until the Imperial Army's return. He was convinced the whole time that the war had never ended.

Like Onoda, we can live our lives in such a way that we don't see or know what is really going on and how it can change the whole course of our life. Onoda didn't have the Japanese Imperial Army to come tell him the war was over, so while life around him moved on for 30 years, he was still living life as though it was the 1940's, and he was holding his ground. That has been much of the way of life in the United Methodist Church, moving forward with churches remaining safe on their own little islands.

If you have been paying attention since 1968 you are up to date with what has been happening since the very first General Conference in 1972. If you have followed the Annual Conference happenings at any point in time you might be aware of what is going on. If you have been paying attention since the 2019 Special General Conference you are very aware of what happened then and that has catapulted us to where we are now; talking about dividing our beloved denomination.

For those of you who were like me when I decided to follow Jesus and start going to church, you might have thought it was enough to just show up for worship every Sunday, go home, and live life until the next Sunday. Not so. Following Jesus means to be paying attention, to God's Word, participating in Bible study, choir, serving in children's ministry, being actively involved in the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, tithing, etc. No, it means to pay attention to what is going on at the leadership level, pastor, district, conference, and global level, in the same way you pay attention to what is going on at the government levels so you can vote.

Every year decisions are made for the church through the Annual and General Conferences. Changes to the *Book of Discipline* are made according to the decisions made there. Have you ever read, thumbed through or even held a *Book of Discipline*? Do you know what's in it? Do you know how it applies to your faith, and how things are "run" at the denominational level? If not, you are in the category of Hiroo Onoda. Church life is going on around you but without you.

Currently, our *Book of Discipline* is fine, if you are a traditionalist believing in the in one, living Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that Jesus is the Son of God, the risen and ascended Lord, that Holy Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine, that marriage is between one man and one woman expressed in love, support, commitment, and shared fidelity, that all lives are of sacred worth, and God's grace is available to all. Currently, the *Book of Discipline* does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers it incompatible with Christian teaching. Currently, pastors may not be "self-avowed, practicing homosexuals" and may not conduct ceremonies that celebrate same-sex weddings or unions.

There are many other provisions in the 898 pages of the current 2016 Book of Discipline. The above-mentioned topics are just a few of the hotly-contested provisions causing the division in the UMC. Since the first General Conference in 1972, homosexuality has been a very hot topic. While it is not the focus of the division it is what is getting the most attention. Other areas that need addressing but aren't getting the attention are outdated organization, bad personnel prep and oversight, aging congregations, declining membership to name a few. These issues are all crying out for help from the Holy Spirit.

The focus of the division, at least from a Traditionalist point of view, is doctrine. Our belief system is under attack, not only from the outside culture, but also from those who are letting the outside culture into their theology. Our beliefs of who and how we worship are in the Book of Discipline. There are those with distorted theology fighting to make changes to who and how we worship and who is able to lead in worship.

At the 2019 Special General Conference, the *Book of Discipline* was upheld with Traditionalist view. This did not sit well with the Progressive leadership, and they are doing all they can to make the changes in the UMC that may just affect the BOD in the future.

“Our work is to live like that *Book of Discipline* no longer exists and to be the church,” said the Rev. David Meredith, an Ohio pastor who has faced denominational discipline hearings since he married his longtime homosexual partner in 2016. (Reported in a 2019 article by Religion News Service. If you are OK with this kind of thinking, no need to read further.

The troubles around the UMC may seem to stem from out West, but the Progressive views are right here in our own IL Great Rivers Conference. Yes, even as close as Bloomington. Hope Church in Bloomington has been allowing an openly gay, transvestite named Isaac Simmons to preach blasphemy from the pulpit.

In May, Simmons posted on his FB page that the Bible is nothing but pain, poetry and performance, not holy. That God himself is nothing, not tangible, “but if she were, she would be queening her way down the runways of Paris, if she were, she would be a divine seamstress weaving together fine couture”, all interlaced with expletives Christian lips won’t say (or fingers won’t type).

The Illinois Great Rivers Conference’s Vermillion River District Committee on Ordained Ministry recently unanimously nominated Isaac Simmons as a candidate for ministry in the United Methodist Church. Our own conference is supporting him, but this clearly goes against the current *Book of Discipline*. He started his first year at Boston University School of Theology this Fall.

There is so much going on in the UMC that is directly opposed to the BOD, and it seems that the express train is not stopping. While it seems, we should be able to patch things up and work together as brothers and sisters in Christ and for the glory of God within our denomination, the reality is we can’t. It’s time to make decisions. The choices are clear. 1) Stay with the UMC and go along with all the changes coming, or 2) Exit and start fresh with a line of Methodism that is in line with your beliefs, or 3) Go independent.

The whole of the Grace Notes format is not large enough to present all the information one needs to know about the current state of the UMC and what ways are available to manage the way forward. Even to go forward is on a time constraint, and steps need to be completed by January 2023 in order to be presented to the Annual Conference by May/June, 2023.

The Church Council has formed an Ad Hoc committee to gather information and present it to the congregation. They will be announcing informational meetings in the coming weeks. If you are concerned by any of this and have access to a computer, you can do the research yourself by going to the following links.

I suggest viewing the 6 videos put out by Rob Renfro of *Good News Magazine*, who spends less than 15 minutes each explaining the problems and the way going forward. You can see them [at https://goodnewsmag.org](https://goodnewsmag.org).

Confessing Movement www.confessingumc.org

Firebrand www.firebrandmag.com

Global Methodist Church www.globalmethodist.org

Illinois Great Rivers Conference www.igrc.org

Mainstream United Methodists www.mainstreamumc.com

Reconciling Movement www.rmnetwork.org

Uniting Methodists www.unitingmethodists.com

United Methodist News Service www.umns.org

I pray that you will take the time to pray, research, and listen for what God is telling you about the future of the UMC and how you will follow Jesus forward. It’s time to not be like Hiroo Onoda and allow the church to go on without you. This is not just a local or global situation. It has eternal consequences.

In Christ’s Love –

Carol Perry