

Q&A From the Path Forward Task Force Survey on Possible LGBTQIA+ Initiatives

From the survey: “What questions do you have about this subject as it pertains to our church?”

The answers below were drafted by Edie Wiarda, Administrative Council Chair, with input from Pastor Joy Barrett and from other council members. Please feel free to comment or ask further questions by sending an email to Edie at admin.council@chelseaumc.org.

Q. I wonder how the Methodist Church will determine who stays and who goes, and how each church will make that decision.

A: This is not yet decided. A possibility is that first, votes will be taken about affiliation at the Annual Conference level (for us, the Michigan Annual Conference). Churches would, by default, go in the same direction as their annual conference. Under this possibility, a church vote would be needed only if the church wishes to go in a different direction from its annual conference.

Q. Will classes be offered online or in person?

A: The church has a Reopening Task Force that is considering these questions. We have certainly learned that on-line gatherings are convenient for many of us even without the worry of COVID; expect on-line classes to continue as an option.

Q. Will there be a flag or some other appropriate symbol of the Chelsea First UMC support visible outside the building, as well as inside?

A: It is Ad Council’s intent that the broader community becomes aware of our stance. A prominent way of conveying this visually is an option under consideration.

Q. Please advise the congregation on who is on the Path forward task force.

A: The Task Force is chaired by Nolan Peterson and Jessica Fahlgren. Members are Andrea Alford, Justin Alford, Marna Balazer, Barbara Brown, Diane Brown, Dave Gilbert, Jeff Melvin, Tammy Melvin, Darrel Noye, Dan Roehm and Bill Ruddock.

Q. What will happen to the Methodist church as a whole (are we waiting for the next conference?) Q. I just wonder about the future of our denomination and whether we will remain a part of it?

A: What happens to the United Methodist Church can only be determined by the global decision-making body, the General Conference, which next meets in September 2022. Theological conservatives, or “Traditionalists,” within the United Methodist Church have announced plans to create a new denomination, to be called the Global Methodist Church (www.globalmethodist.org). It is expected that this group will participate in the next General

Conference of the United Methodist Church in September 2022, and then separate. After separation, the remaining UMC is seen as likely to revise the Book of Discipline in ways that allow churches and clergy to embrace same-sex marriage and ordination of gay clergy. There may also be a new denomination that represents the “left”; this is less certain. Information about the Liberation Methodist Connexion is available at www.thelmx.org.

Q. I didn't answer the RMN question because I don't understand the implications of doing so. It sounds great, but does this mean we do affiliate with UMC overall? If the latter, I'd have to learn a lot more about the tradeoffs.

A: The implications of affiliating with the Reconciling Ministries Network are unclear to the Administrative Council as well. We have asked the Path Forward Task Force to investigate and make a recommendation.

Q. Are we seen as welcoming now?

A: If the question pertains to how we are perceived in the community, the honest answer is that we don't know. It is one of the main goals of the new communications staff position that we accurately convey our beliefs and what kind of experience people can expect when they worship or participate in other ways with us.

Q. Why is it necessary to divide the church over this issue?

A: Whether God blesses same-gender unions is question of conscience that people feel strongly about on all sides. The urgency has grown with legalization of same-gender weddings, and with changes in societal attitudes toward homosexuality and gender diversity. It is the Administrative Council's strong belief that doing outreach and evangelism to attract people to our church becomes impossible without stating a clear policy on this issue. It is also the Council's view that this congregation will suffer far more by avoiding the question than by addressing it head on.

Q. What percentage of our membership has confirmed their affirmation of the Administrative Council's Statement?

A: Members have not been asked whether they affirm the Administrative Council's prior statements nor the new policy on weddings. There are several reasons for this. First, agreement on same-gender marriage is not a prerequisite for being part of our community. Second, the Administrative Council has a duty to lead without resorting to opinion polls. Third, Ad Council is confident about what constitutes the appropriate direction for this congregation. That said, while not asked directly, the recent poll by the Path Forward Task Force suggests that a large majority of our community shares the view that the prohibitions on same-gender weddings and ordination of married gay clergy should be overturned.

Multiple Qs. 1. How can the congregation express its desire for the future direction of CFUMC once the leadership has publicly proclaimed its intention? 2. Why have conservative/traditionalist voices been ignored and silenced? 3. Why is our church unwilling/refusing to extend a gracious welcome to all potential post-separation denominational option presentations for the congregation to be fully informed before congregational decisions are made about CFUMC future alignment?

A: Q1 relates to the immediately prior question answered above. Q2 & 3 express a frustration by conservatives or traditionalists at not being given a venue at which to make counter-arguments, which some of our members have requested, and perhaps a sense that our church has been hijacked by an Administrative Council that is out of touch with the membership. The primary focus of the Administrative Council in the past year has been to get us to a point of clarity, so that we can look our community in the eye and state unambiguously what kind of church we are. Without this clarity we are unable to effectively offer Christ to our community. We have tried to handle this sensitive issue with delicacy and care. To the best of our ability during COVID, we have given ample opportunity for uncensored comment and feedback. Everything in the past year has confirmed that the direction we are moving in is appropriate for Chelsea First. What we have not done is create and host events to which our people are invited and at which Traditionalists control the floor. We did not feel this would be in the church's best interest.

Those wishing to learn more about the Traditionalist view and plans should seek out the new Global Methodist Church at www.globalmethodist.org, or the Wesleyan Covenant Association at www.wesleyan covenant.org. The Michigan Wesleyan Covenant Association can be reached at (248)-887-1311; it is led by Rev. Tom Anderson of Highland UMC, tanderson@humc.us. Rev. Tom is the son of Ed and Roberta Anderson, longtime members here. Those wishing to learn more about the possibility of a new left/progressive denomination should seek out the Liberation Methodist Connexion at www.thelmx.org.

Q. Do you agree that these people can be united in marriage in our church?

A: Yes, that is the purpose of the new wedding policy.

Q. Does the church think it can embrace the world's way and dismiss God's way without doing much harm to our eternal destiny?

A. No. But because this feels like a rhetorical question, I suspect that we disagree about what constitutes God's way.

Q. I am confused by a few items. The statement "Because of hurtful actions by our denomination" is not clear to me. I have not seen hurtful actions from CFUMC. The question re: children and youth - I disagree because I do not know what content you are preparing, and what age group you would be exposing. I disagree on RMN - it "multiplies" the love.... not sure what this even means. I recognize this is a difficult topic.

A: These are thoughtful questions and point out how surveys can be frustrating and don't allow full Christian conferencing. It also tells us that we should be cautious about over-interpreting the survey results.

Q. How does this pertain to the clergy? How should this pertain to the clergy?

A: With regard to the actions of clergy on our staff, the Administrative Council does not in any way intend to infringe on the autonomy of clergy to determine how they live out their ordination vows. For example, the Chelsea First wedding policy allows for clergy other than our staff to officiate as weddings in our building so long as a staff clergy person participates. That said, Pastor Joy as Senior Pastor is responsible per the Book of Discipline for all events that take place on church grounds. It is a violation of the Book of Discipline for her to allow a same-gender wedding to take place, even if she is not the officiant. Her support for the change in wedding policy thus indicates her willingness to make a public stand of "ecclesial disobedience." It is unlikely that the Administrative Council would have voted to change the wedding policy if Pastor Joy were not in full support.

Q. Is there someone at the church that is willing to talk with people that have problems that are part of the LGBT community?

A. We have several persons, both staff and volunteers, who can provide a listening, supportive space for conversation and guidance. Let's encourage each other to reach out.

Q. Will there be boundaries of protection for LGBTQIA+ folks if they do want to engage in a bible study? From my personal experience, there are some people with damning opposing views and that could undermine the welcoming and accepting community CFUMC is working to build. Q. How will we continue to express god's love & caring for those who disagree?

A. The fact that official church policy and our senior pastor have embraced the theological position of full acceptance of gay marriage will hopefully provide much of the "boundary of protection" mentioned in the question. If past discussions have crossed a line, it may have been because people felt a need to state a position in what they felt was a time of uncertainty in our congregation. I.e., they felt a fight was underway, and needed to declare sides. In our congregation, we are now past this point. Much of the animating sting should subside.

In any small group setting, the leader – with help from all of us -- has to be on guard for expressions that are hurtful or that stymie open discussion. The leader – with help from all of us -- also needs to foster an atmosphere that allows anyone to express any question or opinion, so long as it is done in a spirit of humility and compassion, and is part of an honest seeking after God's truth. One person's need to ask a question or to struggle with interpretation always needs to be held in balance with the possibility that the topic brings up past hurts for another. What we all want is a place with Christ's grace in the center, and not a sense that we need to

“police” each other’s comments. What won’t be ok are attempts to usurp the authority of the senior pastor to set our theological boundaries.

Q. I am sure there are questions about how inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ group plays out in the areas of ministry and weddings within our church.

A. The new wedding policy clears up that portion of this question. With regard to other aspects of ministry, each of us can influence this by making suggestions and especially by being willing to organize groups or to lead classes.

Q. How can we integrate all people into the fabric of the church? It's time to get uncomfortable, open up not just our church, but our homes and listen.

A. Humanity has a terrible track record on this front. Our hope is Christ, keeping in mind Galatians 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

As the verse points out, this is an issue that goes well beyond gender diversity, and extends to race and class. If we define our local community as roughly the Chelsea School District, then we face the reality that current demographics trend toward white, affluent and well-educated. It is altogether appropriate that we orient our programming and messaging to the “mission field” in which we are located. But we have to be constantly watchful that we continue to see, and genuinely welcome, those who don’t fit the dominant “profile.”

Perhaps it will be fruitful for us to widen our definition of “our community.” We have members and worshippers from outlying places like Jackson, Manchester, Grass Lake and Stockbridge – people who have sought out us out because their needs are not met closer to home. We also know that there are many who work in Chelsea but cannot afford to live here. Health workers care every day for our saints at CRC, The Pines, Silver Maples and St. Joe’s Chelsea. Perhaps we can think creatively about how to expand “our community” to include them.

All of this becomes important and relevant as we try to implement a new program of messaging and outreach.