

Frequently Asked Questions with Pastor Jim

Introduction

My role as your pastor is complex in these times. I spend many hours each week prayerfully discerning how to best lead our church as we approach our Church Conference and look toward future ministry.

I have intentionally worked alongside our lay leaders to develop teams to guide us through much of this conversation because I believe in the ministry of the laity and the stewardship you hold over our congregation. It would be unwise and harmful for me to take over your role in discerning the church's future, which God has entrusted to your care. Instead, I have partnered with you in communal discernment and guidance.

I trust that the Holy Spirit is at work and will speak through the body of the church during the Church Conference. I respect your ability, both corporately and as individuals, to prayerfully choose the course for the future of our church. Therefore, I have no interest in or intention of telling you how to vote. However, as your senior pastor, I believe it is incumbent upon me to share my perspectives on the matters at hand and to equip you to have biblically and theologically informed conversations about the issues.

In this article, I will share my responses to ten frequently asked questions and questions you may have for me. I speak for myself, aware that you may disagree with me overall or on finer points. Disagreement doesn't hurt my feelings. It is inevitable in every relationship. We get to choose if it will be constructive or destructive. I am committed to sharing graciously and loving each of you in Christ, regardless of our viewpoints. I hope you will trust my heart and intentions as I share my understanding of these matters, holding holy space for me as I have for you.

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Pastor Jim's Responses to Frequently Asked Questions

1. Our discernment team presented two theological arguments concerning same-sex marriage in the church and the ordination of practicing homosexuals in their final report. Which one do you agree with and why?

This refers to “The Temple-Pace Conversation,” which you can find [here](#) (the summary of that conversation is found on pg. 9-15 of the Discernment Team Report [here](#)). I’m grateful that this information is included in our Discernment Team report. I think it’s essential to be well-versed in the various positions, regardless of our own. It helps us to be well-informed and more articulate in our thinking.

Dr. Pace argues that the United Methodist Church should change its position on the practice of homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and the ordination of non-celibate, homosexual persons. While I respect Dr. Pace’s well-articulated convictions (and those that align with his thinking), I disagree.

I don’t have time or space to offer in-depth counterarguments to his four main points. However, I will note that I find serious logical, theological, and biblical flaws in his arguments concerning:

- 1) the conflation of same-sex attraction and the choice to engage in same-sex sexual-genital contact,
- 2) his exegesis and interpretation of scripture regarding same-sex sexual activity,
- 3) what it means to include and exclude, and
- 4) his overall understanding of marriage, which makes false dichotomies and misarticulates the nature of Christian marriage.

Dr. Temple’s position, however, is a close approximation of my understanding. He expresses nuanced, compassionate, and biblically rich arguments that place sexual activity within the marriage bond between a male and a female. Dr. Temple faithfully expresses the heart of God, a well-reasoned interpretation of scripture, and a compassionate heart for all people.

Drawing upon years of in-depth and often agonizing study on marriage and human sexuality (an occupational hazard, I guess), I join the witness of classic Christian teaching in affirming that sexual activity belongs in the bonds of marriage between a man and a woman.

I want to restate a few of Dr. Temple’s thoughts to keep them before us.

- *The Bible does not condemn anyone for an orientation, only for behavior.* There is nothing inherently sinful about an attraction or a desire. Actions are sinful. The difference speaks volumes about how we translate biblical witness into ethical Christian living, especially as we engage in ministry with same-sex attracted people.
- Those dealing with same-sex attraction “need the church’s love and support, which ought never to be constrained by either awkwardness or misplaced political correctness.” All people are valuable to God, and the church should love all people, minister to them, and offer them Christ. No one is exempt from the wooing of God. That doesn’t mean that all behaviors are acceptable to God. Yet, the good news is that God can forgive every transgression and make us right with Him regardless of how often we miss the mark.

This is a nuanced conversation, so I hope you’ll do me the honor of reading the remainder of these responses to ensure you can understand my heart.

2. How does this understanding express love and grace?

“Love” and “grace” have many different meanings. When we hear things like “God is love” (1 John 4:8), we are prone to import our understanding of love (usually romantic, familial, or emotional). As such, we may feel like anything that makes us or another uncomfortable is unloving. It’s worth remembering that not everything uncomfortable is hurtful, and not everything painful is harmful.

When I was first convicted of my sin and fallenness, I was uncomfortable, pained, and grieved in my soul. Yet, it wasn’t the church or unloving people that made me feel that way. It was God. The Holy Spirit poured out prevenient grace upon me to awaken me to my sin so that I might recognize my need for God. God did that for me out of love so that I might receive God’s greater love through Jesus Christ.

God’s love is “holy love.” It is a consuming fire that purifies our hearts so that we might live fully as his children through the adoption of the Spirit, in deep union with God’s holy and self-giving heart, and glorify God, enjoying Him forever.

Is it loving to welcome someone into the church's life and yet not perform their wedding or withhold one of many areas of ministry from them? Yes, I believe it is.

These limitations are not unique to this subject. As a pastor, I’ve performed hundreds of weddings. I’ve also refused weddings on various grounds that have nothing to do with sexuality. I have served on District Committees on Ordained Ministry and the Board of Ordained Ministry. As a part of such committees, I have enjoyed walking with people as they enter ordained ministry. I’ve similarly been a part of the difficult task of directing people away from ordained or licensed ministry after communal discernment, despite their skills and gifts.

It is loving to offer people Christ and rescue them from the grip of sin. As difficult as it is, it is not loving to withhold this eternally valuable information.

The term “grace” has similar difficulties. In Methodist churches of all kinds, you’re bound to hear a strong emphasis on God’s grace. And rightly so because grace will transform the world. I invite you to re-listen to my sermon from September 25, 2022, “Grace Will Transform the World” ([you can do so here](#)).

In common parlance, we use “grace” to express kindness and openness to others. That is a great and good thing! That is not, however, a theological definition of grace in keeping with Christian tradition. That God is gracious does not mean that God has no boundaries or expectations. John Wesley defined grace as “the power of the Holy Spirit.” This power is freely poured out upon all people to awaken them to their sin, enable them to repent, and free their will to accept the work of Jesus Christ. Grace continues to be freely poured out upon people so they may be fully free from even the sin that rears its ugly head within the believer and thus be holy.

Is my position gracious? Yes, I believe so. I welcome all people into my life. I love all people in Christ to the best of my ability (which, by God's power, grows daily). All people are welcome in our church, to join our church, to be in relationship with our church, and into the family of faith. And, as they are, they will encounter the grace of God, which will impress upon them how loved they are by God and draw them out of darkness and into the light if they are willing to accept it.

3. Is it judgmental to hold a traditional theology of sex, marriage, and ordination?

No.

Jesus says, “Do not judge, lest you be judged” (Matthew 7:1). What does this mean? It does not mean that we must be without boundaries. It does not mean that we cannot make distinctions. It means we cannot judge a person’s worth and condemn them. We are not equipped to do that. It means reducing people to their outlooks or behaviors. Far from judgmental, noting behavior or sin, holding boundaries, and inviting people into deeper life profoundly *affirms* a person’s worth.

We are not to go looking for everyone else’s flaws. We must first “take the plank out of our own eye” (Matthew 7:3-5). We aren’t to define people by their behaviors or inclinations or devalue others because of them. After all, “there is no one righteous, no not one” (Romans 3:10).

Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ!

4. Isn’t this the same as when the church began ordaining women, rejected slavery, or implemented integration?

No. The matters of same-sex marriage and the ordination of non-celibate homosexual persons are not experientially or biblically equivalent to these issues. I can see how, at first glance, they seem to be the same thing. It looks like the church used the Bible to oppose these things and now considers the Bible differently. The assumption is that the way we read the Bible has changed. So, am I resisting the Holy Spirit if I don’t change my understanding of sexuality? Again, no.

First, let's look at the experiential dissimilarities. The simplest way to express this is with the term agency, the means or power to choose. One does not have agency as to whether they are born female. One does not have agency as to whether they are born of one race or people group. And, by definition, one does not have agency as to whether they are enslaved.

I agree that many people don't have agency as to whether they are attracted to the same sex or the opposite sex. But everyone has agency over their behaviors. Therefore, these topics are not experientially analogous. Again, I believe that the Bible does not condemn anyone for their attractions or involuntary desires but for their actions (and even then, God is merciful and gracious, and abounding in steadfast love...forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" Exodus 34:6-7).

Note: Everyone deserves equal treatment and the ability to thrive free from threats or violence. I recognize that members of the LGBTQIA+ community often do not have that. I do not believe that refraining from same-sex marriage or the ordination of non-celibate, homosexual persons violates those things.

Second, let's look at the biblical dissimilarities. When we read the Bible, we don't take one verse and make an entire theology out of it. We read the Bible considering the whole tenor and revelation of scripture.

Take slavery, for example. The Bible mentions slavery. That does not mean that the Bible supports slavery. Even setting aside the biblical historical context of slavery (and the differences between the different kinds of slavery found throughout the world), the trajectory of scripture proclaims the freedom of all people. In Ephesians, for example, Paul transforms the cultural reality of slavery. A poignant example of the Bible's message on slavery comes from Philemon, where Paul urges Philemon, in the name of Christ, to free Onesimus, his slave. The Bible mentions slavery, but that does not mean it supports slavery. The whole tenor of the Bible, read Christologically, condemns slavery.

Did the early American church use verses from the Bible to support enslavement? Regrettably, some did. That's the danger of building whole theologies out of a single verse. Early Methodists, however, did not. John Wesley is famous for partnering with William Wilberforce in the abolition movement. Early Christians did not either. For example, Gregory of Nyssa, in the fourth century, taught against slavery.

The same argument is made regarding women in ministry. Individual passages such as verses in 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:12, taken in isolation from the tenor of scripture, appear to indicate that women shouldn't serve in ministry. However, many, many passages throughout scripture magnify and amplify women in ministry. Here are a few examples, Miriam in Exodus, Deborah in Judges, Esther, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Lydia in the book of Acts, Phoebe, Priscilla, and Junia in Paul's letters. Do not forget that Jesus' resurrection was first proclaimed by a woman.

So, what do we make of 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:12? We must ask why they stand apart from the whole tenor of scripture. Because they do, we turn to their context and recognize

that these letters are written to specific communities with specific circumstances. We read them in that light and don't make them normative contrary to the remainder of scripture. Therefore, we celebrate the ministry women in every office, ordained or lay.

However, the tenor of scripture consistently prohibits same-sex sexual activity and never affirms it. Similarly, the scriptures, from beginning to end, consistently reinforce the nature of the covenant of marriage between a woman and a man. Therefore, this matter is not biblically equivalent to the others.

5. Do you believe a traditional understanding of marriage and ordination excludes homosexual persons from the church? How do you envision our church's relationship with them?

By no means does a traditional understanding of marriage and ordination exclude homosexual persons from the church! "Come to the gospel feast! Let every soul be Jesus' guest!" (United Methodist Hymnal, #339, "Come, Sinners, to the Gospel Feast" by Charles Wesley).

God woos all people to Himself, regardless of sexuality or any distinction. That's prevenient grace! *Everyone* who accepts the invitation of Jesus Christ by faith will be saved. The qualifications for salvation involve repentance and confession of Jesus Christ as Lord. That's it. Jesus does the rest. One doesn't have to change or amend their life before Christ justifies them. From there, we are changed as we cooperate with the Holy Spirit, who works full salvation in our lives.

The church is open. All are welcome. All people are eligible to be members of the church. All people need the ministry of the church.

I recognize that some people will feel excluded if they cannot be married in their church or ordained in the church. I lament that. However, I don't think traditional theology must be viewed this way. It is incumbent upon us to faithfully and compassionately live our faith so that people know that they are not excluded. We must support them as they live their faith.

Even if the church clarifies its theological understandings on these topics, it must do the hard work of discerning how to translate them into ethics and ministry. We not only learn our theology, but we also live it, and we minister from our theological and ethical convictions. In this case, we must compassionately live our theology and minister to the LGBTQIA+ population. Same-sex couples will get married, even if not by the church. Therefore, the church must do the deep work of discerning how to offer them ministry and welcome them into the church.

A faithful and compassionate traditional theology of sexuality and marriage can lead to a joy-filled community where all people are welcome and offered Christ.

6. What is your take on the trajectory of the United Methodist Church?

I love the United Methodist Church. I found Christ in the United Methodist Church. My family has given its life for the cause of the Gospel through the United Methodist Church. Yet, I am frustrated by the United Methodist Church.

I think it is an institutional failure that these conversations have ended up in the hands of local churches. There have been many opportunities for the UMC's larger governing bodies to guide us through these challenges. Yet, they did not for various reasons, and the responsibility to address them has fallen to local congregations like ours.

Not everyone agrees with me on this (and that's ok): I believe the United Methodist Church is charting a course in a new direction. That happens. I get it. The question is whether that course will best serve the mission and ministry of a given local church. For some, it will be great. For others, it will not.

Why do I say that the UMC is charting a new course? For one, leaders across the United Methodist Church have said as much and acted accordingly. Bishops, pastors, and other leaders who have released information and sermons urging people to remain in the UMC admit that changes are on the horizon regarding marriage and ordination. Delegates to the recent Jurisdictional Conferences acted as such through bishop elections and resolutions. These delegates will be the delegates to the next General Conference. (Read more in our Discernment Team report on pg. 16-21 [here](#).)

I believe the UMC has serious governance issues. The Western Jurisdiction continued to violate the Book of Discipline and Judicial Council rulings, again electing and consecrating a married homosexual person as a bishop. The structure of the UMC does not allow United Methodists in other jurisdictions to address the broken covenant.

A group of bishops seeks ways to hold others accountable across jurisdictional lines. That will be possible if the United States becomes a new regional conference like Africa and Europe. However, this change will also expedite changes in the Book of Discipline as United States delegates, who have proven to desire changes, will be able to address matters of sexuality apart from the worldwide church.

Similarly, the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference marked a tone shift in our jurisdiction. For the first time, each bishop we elected advocates for changing the discipline regarding sexuality, marriage, and ordination. Resolutions were passed that differ in character from prior SEJ conferences.

Because we will not vote for new delegates before General Conference 2024, the same delegates seated at the jurisdictional conferences will represent the church at GC24. With disaffiliations, deaths, and resignations, there will be fewer traditional delegates. This is true in South Georgia. I estimate that most US delegates will advocate for changing the Book of Discipline. While delegates from other regions of the world will be present, I can't help but think that the new course will be set at GC24 with the ship embarking at subsequent General Conferences.

Regardless of potential changes, the wave of disaffiliations has fundamentally changed the UMC and our South Georgia Annual Conference. Our conference is already drastically smaller after the first waves of disaffiliations, and it will be even more so after the special called Annual Conference in May. South Georgia recently announced that its budget will be cut by \$1.6 million. In addition to sharing a bishop with another annual conference, we are now sharing administrative staff. Beginning in July, we will reduce the number of district superintendents to three to serve our six districts.

It's not a matter of whether change is coming; globally and locally, much of the UMC already looks different. Beyond that, I believe the UMC is mounting a changing tide and charting a new course regarding human sexuality and marriage. This moment allows churches to discern whether this aligns with how they envision the future ministry of their local church. To be clear, I believe God has a future with hope prepared for churches that remain in the UMC and churches that disaffiliate. In which future is God calling each local church to participate?

7. What is your take on why we have chosen to vote now instead of later?

In November of 2022, after receiving the report of the Discernment Team and prayerful reflection and deliberation, our Church Council held a meeting to vote on our path forward. They considered three courses:

- 1) no congregational meeting to vote on disaffiliation from the UMC,
- 2) delay a call for a congregational meeting to vote on disaffiliation from the UMC until after the General Conference in 2024, and
- 3) schedule a congregational meeting with our district superintendent as soon as can be scheduled for a vote on disaffiliation from the UMC in 2023.

Intending to hold three votes to narrow down the options, it became clear after the first vote that most council members wished to move forward this year. A second vote was held to confirm that decision. The Church Council voted 33-3 for a Church Conference to vote on disaffiliation in 2023.

What's my take on that choice? I support it for two reasons. The most important reason is for the health of our church. This discussion is upon us (whether we want it or not), it is not going away, and it is a stressor upon our church, community, and mission. Clarifying where we are on this matter, one way or another, will alleviate the stress (after a transition period) and allow us to move forward together in ministry.

Second, one must ask, "What do I need to see from the 2024 General Conference for my concerns to go away, and what are the chances that it will happen?" It is not wrong to want to wait until after the General Conference. But, given the options available to a local church, one's confidence in the outcomes and remaining options would have to be high.

Regardless, our Church Council has called the question. The matter is before us in March. The wisest choice is to consider it unlikely that our church will want to do all this again after General Conference. So, prayerfully vote as the Spirit leads you at our upcoming Church Conference.

8. *How do you think we should vote?*

You should vote as the Lord leads you after prayer, thorough study, and conversation with others. Again, I audaciously believe that the Holy Spirit will speak through the congregation as you faithfully steward this moment on behalf of the church. That said, I will give you three words of advice.

1. Know the ballot. A preview is available to you in the Discernment Team Report.
 - If you like the direction of the United Methodist Church and feel it fits you and our congregation, you might vote “no” on disaffiliation.
 - If you feel like the direction of the UMC is not a good fit for you and our congregation, you might vote “yes” on disaffiliation.
 - There may be other reasons that inform your vote. Either way, I encourage you to be clear and confident in your vote.
 - Some have read the ballot and wondered if there are ethical challenges to voting, either yes or no. I’ve also taken that journey and concluded that people can vote “yes” to disaffiliate or “no” to remain UMC without integrity issues.
2. Look out for my upcoming article, “How I’m Speaking with My Kids,” which might be helpful for you as you talk to your minor children who are full church members.
3. Please re-read my article entitled “Lenses: How to Interpret this Moment,” and remember that we love each other, we love the Lord, and we love our church. Nothing has to change that.

9. *What will you do based on the outcome of our Church Conference?*

I have shared a prepared statement with the Church Council, Staff-Parish Relations Committee, and several smaller groups. It is only fair to share it with you, too. Here is what I’ve been sharing:

“I am a compassionate, traditional Methodist. In other words, I affirm classic Christian theology and practice, including prevenient grace that invites all people into relationship with God and the church. Additionally, I hold traditional understandings about sexuality, marriage, and ordination. I believe this honors the faith once delivered to us through the apostles and the church across the ages.

I have been discerning along with you. I am honored to have you as wise and Spirit-filled partners on this journey. This is a nuanced matter as a pastor who lives under God’s vocational calling. In addition to matters of conscience, I seek divine clarity on the issues of call and vocation.

I can say this today, with the caveats that I am leaving room for God to speak, and I reserve the right to change or clarify my remarks:

My heart is with this congregation. I plan to stay with First Methodist. God called us together, and I believe this has been confirmed repeatedly over the past two years. I am with you, as

you'll have me.

If you choose to remain with the UMC, I am with you. In such a case, know that my theology and ministry will not change regardless of changes in the United Methodist Church. If you decide to disaffiliate, I am with you with the following notes:

- I ultimately prefer to be part of a Wesleyan/Methodist Connection. I am a Wesleyan/Methodist in my bones (and I think you are, too).
- Apart from any possible interim period of independence in preparation for affiliating with another denomination/connection, I do not plan to serve long-term in an independent congregation (and I would strongly advise the church against going in this direction)."

10. You've said you'll stay with the church regardless of the outcome. Does that mean that you don't have strong convictions about this?

I have firm convictions about scripture, theology, and the order of the church. A fundamental conviction through this discernment process is faithfulness to God and the people to whom God has called me. I feel called to be your pastor. I want to be your pastor. There will be a "day after," and I feel a sense of call to lead with you through it and beyond to the glorious, Spirit-empowered future that God has in store for us.

It's important to note that churches and pastors have different pathways through this season. At any time, on any day, all it takes for a pastor to move on is a call from God and a two-week notice (or, more likely, a commitment to stay through the end of a conference year). The church doesn't have that flexibility. I mention this to reinforce that the church and I have different options. I can move on at any time. The church has very limited opportunities to do so.

If First UMC is called to remain in the UMC, then I feel called and willing to journey with you without issues of conscience. I will do my best to advocate for faith and practice as I understand them within the denomination. If issues of conscience later arise for me, we can address them. If First UMC is called to disaffiliate from the UMC, I feel called and honored to journey with you.

Either way, my theology and approach to reading scripture will stay the same. You have a sense of my ministry, preaching, and teaching. You know of my love for classical theology, teaching the basics of the faith, and calling people into a living relationship with Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Those will not change, regardless of the outcome of our Church Conference. Nor will they change, irrespective of the direction of the United Methodist Church.

My first loyalty is to Jesus Christ. I serve Him through the denomination, not the other way around. As such, it is my honor to serve you. I want to be your pastor. Even if you disagree with what I've shared with you. I love you in Christ today and will do so after our Church Conference.