

## **Excerpt From: “A Divided UMC: How We'll Fail At The Main Thing”**

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By James C. Howell

I've blogged quite a few times about our fragile United Methodist Church, making the case for, but really just pleading for unity...

I have tried to point out that sexuality, while enormously important and at the core of what it means to be holy, is not at the center of our theology. Our cardinal beliefs, which pertain to salvation, are about God, not us. Our sexuality is always a bit broken, fallen, bedeviled by subterranean forces we hardly understand. I would exit the denomination if it declared Jesus was just a man, or we are saved by works, but not over a single practice among hundreds.

Most importantly, I've explained how splitting up would be the worst conceivable witness to the unchurched, and to our cynical world. If we can't do any better than the division and rancor in our country right now, we prove we have nothing to offer...

Suppose we get the divorce. One denomination becomes two; a conservative, brooking no deviation from straight or celibate sexuality, and a progressive, allowing and even affirming same gender marriage and LGBTQ ordinations. What then? The General Conference sends a memo to me and our board chair, giving us ninety days or six months to select which way we go?

Our case is pretty interesting, indicative of why there will be more carnage than we anticipate, utterly harrowing and heartbreaking to me and the people I love. If we look at just the property, our trustees hold, in trust for the conference, massive neo-gothic structures sitting on prime real estate in Charlotte, North Carolina. Both of the new judicatories would covet the property and the apportionment income...

Internally, we would be forced to make a choice we do not wish or need to make. We have engaged in the arduous labor our denomination as a whole has never engaged in: a prayerful, thoughtful, respectful conversation on the theology and practice of sexuality. With broad and strongly felt disagreement on the matter, we have chosen to stay together, to love, and by our very unity to be a witness to the world.

And yet we would be compelled to make a choice. How would that happen? Is it simply an item on the agenda of the next Administrative Board meeting, and majority wins? Do we take a congregational vote, with each member getting to cast a ballot? Would there be campaigning within? Or even from outside groups lobbying to win Myers Park?

I've tried to guesstimate what the tally here would be. We have 5,200 members...Of the 5,200 official members, I'd guess 1,600 wouldn't pay attention or open their mail. Of the 3,600 left, I'd imagine 1,400 would rally to the progressive side, and about 1,000 would go conservative. Or maybe it would be roughly a tie. Or maybe 1,400 to 1,000 the other way. What would happen to the "losers"? Of course, the remaining 1,200 would be too disgusted to vote at all. Our young adults would, quite simply, be done with us.

Many — several dozen, I'd estimate — would exit and become Southern Baptist, or Episcopalians. I'd suspect that many more, though, in the hundreds, would just give up on church altogether if the one they loved and trusted couldn't do any better than this sorry state of affairs. And

I would not blame one of them. Families would be divided over which way to go. A 5,200 member church gutted, with maybe 1,500 left.

We would quickly have to lay off two thirds of our staff and hack our mission spending down to a small fraction of what it's been. Within months, a clinic in Haiti would shut down; families moving out of homelessness would head back to the streets...

Where would the clergy we'd have to let go wind up? Not only would the financial decimation reduce the number of pastoral jobs out there, we would also have a rash of mismatched clergy and congregations. If congregations get to choose which denomination to go with, I'd imagine the clergy would get to pick, too. At least in my part of the world (and I suspect all across the United States), on average the clergy are far more progressive than their congregations. In Western North Carolina, for instance, out of 1,000 clergy I'd estimate at least 500 would choose the new progressive institution; but no more than a few dozen churches would do the same. Where would the clergy work? And who would pastor the conservative churches?...

The unforeseen ripple effects of a forced division, even in a single parish like mine, would be catastrophic. A split in United Methodism, beyond the heartache, the lost relationships, and the embarrassment of theological surrender, would create a black hole of practical disaster...

Purists will say you should do the right thing, no matter what the consequences are. But within our denomination, aren't we picking one right thing, which isn't really the main thing, and then by picking that one right thing to be right about, rendering ourselves incapable of doing all the other right things that really are the main thing?

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