

# Changing Strategies to Change Minds

## What we can learn from United Methodists

Amanda Udis-Kessler

The greatest vulnerability of Christian activism is that it is enmeshed in organizations dedicated to Christian worship. Conservative rhetoric of "God," "salvation," and "faith" has more currency in such places than talk of "human values," "justice" and "service," which occupies the high ground of secular discourse. (Warner 1988: 268)

At the halfway point between General Conference 2000 and General Conference 2004, LGBT United Methodists and supporters find ourselves caught between hope and fear. Despite the courageous witness shown in 2000, the legislative prognosis for 2004 doesn't look very good for inclusion-minded Methodists. What should we inclusionists<sup>1</sup> be doing now to change hearts and minds? Perhaps more importantly, what shouldn't we be doing?

While not a United Methodist, I have had the opportunity to delve into this question for the past several years as the result of writing my doctoral dissertation on the inclusion struggle in the United Methodist Church. I watched caucuses on both sides at work at General Conference 2000, observed committee and plenary debates and votes, ate with the Evangelicals and prayed with the inclusionists. I also interviewed a number of delegates, including Evangelicals and moderates. Finally, I read literally thousands of pages, from de-

**Editor's Note:** As a good sociologist, the author focuses on one denomination for this article, the basis of research for a doctoral dissertation. Yet it is not to single out United Methodists for criticism, because what is described is essentially the same for most of our denominational LGBT groups as we approach our legislative bodies. In addition, the Reconciling Ministries Network has historically approached the United Methodist Church with multiple strategies that have included ministries of presence, education, and reconciliation, especially in local congregations and districts. The suggested shift of strategy may be one of emphasis rather than kind.

nominal history to caucus websites, including every possible position on the issue. This article discusses some of my findings about resistance to full LGBT inclusion in the denomination, and offers suggestions for what we should do next.<sup>2</sup> The analysis and suggestions presented here will be painful and politically problematic for many of us. They will force us to confront, individually and communally, whether our priorities should be gaining access or bringing about a revolution in the denomination, and will offer different prognoses depending on these priorities.

Our first impulse when we think about resistance to inclusion is to think that the Evangelicals, led by such cau-

be focused on what the sexuality conflict has to do with the denomination as an institution: with the kind of language and logic<sup>3</sup> that most United Methodists find appropriate to the institution, and with the need of most United Methodists to support the institution as it currently exists.

### *Institutional Priorities: Ours and Theirs*

We can start with the obvious point that our language and logic is dramatically different from that of the Evangelicals. We talk about inclusion at the heart of the Gospel, second-class citizenship in the Kingdom of God, institutionalized homophobia and heterosexism, full participation in the life of the church, singling out a class of people as ineligible, being welcome or unwelcome, discrimination and oppression, and the protection of pastors' rights. We sing, "We Shall Overcome" and compare heterosexism within the church to

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caucuses as Good News, are engaging in a power play. My research certainly supported this way of thinking about the problem, but it directed me to another way that I think is powerful and largely undiscussed, and that (if correct) has important implications for how we should work to win over the people in the pews. Put simply, it is that we should

racism within the church. We define the condemnation and exclusion of LGBT people as a justice issue, as a matter of fairness and equality.

Even when (frequently) we use religious justifications, these justifications tend to be politicized and to have an anti-institutional feel to them. Jesus is brought into the picture as one who

#### *Footnotes:*

<sup>1</sup> I use this term to denote LGBT United Methodists, heterosexual allies, and LGBT supporters outside of Methodism (such as myself).

<sup>2</sup> While my research focused exclusively on United Methodists, some of the ideas presented here may be relevant for inclusionists in other mainline denominations.

<sup>3</sup> By "logic," I mean values, experiences and priorities. The idea behind this section is that there is a logic that most Methodists take as basic to their connection to the faith tradition, and that inclusionists challenge this logic by "bringing politics into it."

focused on the oppressed, broke down barriers, and held up love over against the law. Moreover, we make use of rallies and civil disobedience, support the work of Soulforce and indeed join that group, and in some cases perform holy unions in part as a matter of protesting the denominational prohibitions.

In contrast, both Evangelicals and those moderate delegates I spoke with who voted against inclusion appealed to what would be considered more classically Christian moral claims. They focused on the Bible and on tradition as authoritative. They spoke at length of Wesleyanism, holiness, perfection, morality, and doctrine. They were very concerned about sustaining the church, and about the importance of maintaining a distinctive denominational identity. Consider the following quotes from post-General Conference interviews with delegates:

*There are times when I think people are confusing the constitution and the Bill of Rights with holiness. It's as though there's not a right or a wrong, but only a matter of discrimination. I get a feeling that we're confusing civil rights issues with theological issues.*

—“Dennis,” a conservative delegate

*My role as a General Conference delegate is to do what is in the church's best interest...to preserve, protect and defend the United Methodist Church. And I do not think that it is in the best interests of the United Methodist Church right now to [remove the prohibitions]...I know the church back home here. I know what the church is like in other places... where the Methodist Church is at its strongest, and I do not think I'm being a good steward of the church if...I vote to change what's in there...[To] the lives of the people whom our stance affects, I know that it's crucially and critically important. I'm not trying to sell that short. But our main role in the world is to call people to Christ and to help them be formed in His image and that's what we're here for and everything else that detracts us from that is to our detriment.*

—“Karl,” a moderate delegate

*It's not about civil rights, it's about holiness.*

—“Clarence,” a moderate delegate

For these delegates and many others with whom I spoke, the political framework of the inclusionists was simply unconvincing. These are not people who generally oppose LGBT civil rights in the public square. Nonetheless, they

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experience the church as being an institution where there are different rules about what's right and what's acceptable. For them, not only is homosexuality not acceptable in the church, the politicized nature of the inclusion struggle is not appropriate for the church.

Now no one, including us, would deny that our inclusionist work is political in nature. And how could it not be? How else could we possibly interpret the prohibitions in the Book of Discipline except through an inequality lens? The LGBT identity developed in a context of oppression, devaluation, and violence, and the post-Stonewall LGBT movement based its strategy on 1960's civil rights activism. We still face opposition—cultural, structural, and interpersonal. Our movement and our identity are both inherently politicized. What should we be doing if not witnessing, demonstrating, disrupting business as usual to hold the church accountable?

### *The People in the Pews*

One possible answer to the question is that we should be stepping back and trying to assess how the United Methodist middle feels, how the people in the pews can best be reached. Consider, for example, the different language and logics described above. Which imagery, which priorities, which values are likely

to appeal to the majority of United Methodists?

Another doctoral dissertation, carried out by sociologist Dawne Moon (2000), helps answer this question. Moon, studying inclusion issues in local Methodist congregations, found that her respondents tended to have an understanding of church in which “church” and “politics” were opposites.

Moon's respondents appeared to construct marriage and the church as unmarked “zones of innocence” standing not just apart from, but in contrast to, issues of politics and inequality. Just as the home has been understood to be a “haven in a heartless world,” the church was a haven from the secular world for the Methodists Moon interviewed. The relevance of Moon's work for us is heartbreakingly clear in the following quote:

*A major stumbling block for gay people in the church is that homosexuality is equated with politics, fallenness, and secularity—in short, things most churchgoers consider to be the opposite of church...When [LGBT] members begin to demand “rights” in the church, they bring in a language of political struggle, of civil rights. In other words, they import a language that many believe pertains to the world rather than God, to bodies rather than spirits, to politics rather than innocence. (Moon 2000: 110, 116)*

Moon's work, and my own, suggest that the United Methodist middle is likely to prefer the Evangelical approach over ours. Because of the institutional meaning that Methodism has come to have for many moderates, the Evangelicals simply seem like better Methodists than the inclusionists. The inclusionists seem “extreme,” “radical,” and “unreasonable.” The Evangelicals seem normal, temperate, and reasonable.

### *Loyal to the Church As It Is*

The following claims and points should be familiar to most inclusionists:

- Legalism should be rejected since Jesus put people above the law.
- Business as usual has no right to go on if it is destroying the dignity of children of God.
- This is a matter of lives, not issues; it's personal, not abstract.
- Since the church has not given inclusionists any legitimate way to seek access, they should feel free to be irritating to those who refuse to acknowledge them.
- Jesus was an indiscriminate lover, a boundary-breaker, and a destroyer of walls between people.
- Methodism should be a community without laws, boundaries, defenses or outsiders, where everyone is welcome and to which everyone belongs regardless of how others feel.
- Faithful Christians do disagree on this issue, therefore the church ought to be able to be honest and say so.

However much we might agree with the above statements and find them moving, they all involve at least some degree of anti-institutionalism. They may be true, but they put personal experience above institutional survival.

They may capture powerful images of Jesus, but they miss basic sociological wisdom about the need of institutions for boundaries in order to remain secure. My research suggests that inclusionists could become a lot more attentive to how troubling many Methodists find arguments such as those above. Inclusionists are not winning over the middle with such approaches, and we may be driving them into the open arms of the Evangelicals. Consider the following quote:

*A lot of us in the middle...do trust the Discipline, do trust the process...maybe people in the middle are voting the way they're voting because of their loyalty to the Discipline.*

—"Reggie," a moderate delegate

To the extent that Reggie is typical (and his quote was certainly representative), the most heartfelt witnessing of the inclusionists may be failing because we fail to grasp how we are coming across to those we wish to influence.

The degree of Methodist loyalty to the denomination as an institution, and resistance to (real or perceived) attacks on it, leads to one last point. Inclusionist strategies at General Conference 2000 may have had the unintended consequence of suggesting that inclusionists are cultivating or exacerbating their outsider status in the denomination. For

example, voting on petitions is as political an action as demonstrating. However, at General Conference 2000, the politics of voting was rendered invisible before the politics of demonstrating, probably because voting is institutionalized in the denomination whereas demonstrations represent disruptions and challenges to the institution.

Similarly, because of the way that "average" delegates dressed, the suits and ties of the conservatives were normalized when compared to the plethora of LGBT symbols (again, emphasizing gay politics outside the church) exhibited by the inclusionists. The rainbow gear marked off the inclusionists as different, even as the suits and ties of the Evangelicals suggested continuity with traditions of dressing respectfully for an event that is at the heart of the denomination and therefore worthy of respect. I own more than my share of rainbow iconography and wear it proudly, but if my goal were to assure a moderate that I was more like her than different from her, I would probably do well to leave the rainbows home for the day and dress like the moderate in question.

What, then, should we do now to win hearts and minds? How can we honor the truths we know, yet meet the goal of changing the denomination from within?

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## *A Matter of Priorities*

What we do next may depend on whether acceptance within the denomination or radical change is more important, and this decision may differ among inclusionists. We need, however, to be very clear about one thing: given the conservative lock-hold at the legislative level, our best hope now rests closer to home.

Practically speaking, this means that those of us for whom a radically, structurally inclusive church is the priority, and for whom activism is a central strategy, face exceptionally hard choices. It may be time to ask whether political activism is as strategically useful as we want it to be. As already suggested, witnessing and protesting firmly link the idea of full LGBT participation in the life of the church with a logic that "the church," rightly or wrongly, sees as different from its own.

If the Methodist middle conceives of politics and church as opposites, the inclusionist movement may do better to distance itself from politics and to identify more closely with spiritual transcendence in order to raise its chances of being seen as worthy of inclusion. Given how politicized homosexuality is, any political action on behalf of inclusion has the unintended effect of amplifying LGBT difference from "normal," "reasonable" Methodism in the same way that a fun house mirror simultaneously magnifies and distorts the image of the person in front of the mirror. A final problem on this front: when moderates feel pushed they "hold the line," and my interviews suggest that they feel far more pushed by us than by Good News, the conservative faction.

I'm not suggesting that any of us forget who we are or where we came from, that we deny the existence of homophobia and heterosexism, that we suppress our pain or our rage. I am suggesting, however, that the expression of our pain and our rage as a form of witness to the denomination is currently strategically problematic, and seems likely to remain so in the near future. When we offer up what we know to be true by demonstrating, we alienate enough moderate United Methodists to hinder our efforts, at least at the legis-

## *Changed About "Changed" Homosexuals*

*Lila Frazier*

Her name, Darlene. We met at a week-long writing camp in 1978. She told us of her struggle. For years she lived as a promiscuous, homosexual thief. Then God found her, but in a setting which told her the sin of thievery was mild compared to her sin of homosexuality. She and those around her prayed for change. Through hypnosis and healing services, she was transformed.

I had never thought much about homosexuality. Intrigued by her story, I decided if Darlene wasn't happy as a homosexual, and if she could change under God's direction, then others could, too. I spoke out about the church needing to listen to "former" homosexuals. In my mind I labeled two outspoken homosexuals from our conference as "the enemy."

More than ten years later, in the processing room of the library where I worked, a book crossed my desk: *Stranger at the Gate: to be Gay and Christian in America*, by Mel White. I knew him! Mel, a keynote speaker at one of our writing camps, is a strong Christian and a good writing teacher—and a homosexual? I read the book immediately (a perk of working in a library!). Mel told of his years of struggle to *not* be a homosexual. But Darlene and others I'd met had changed. I wrote Darlene asking if some homosexuality was physical and some psychological. She wrote back saying she didn't think so, with no explanation.

Later she wrote to tell me she'd met and fallen in love with a woman. She now believes her "transformation" was wishful thinking. However, her acceptance of God did bring about transformation in her life. She stopped being a thief! She made restitution for what she'd embezzled from her employer. She knows God loves her. She and her partner are in a church which loves them as they are. ▼

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lative level. If demonstrating is not the best way of changing hearts and minds, we need to make a decision about priorities: is activist witnessing more important, or is change more important?

Some will answer that there can be no compromise, and that telling the truth Soulforce-style is the only way to maintain dignity and integrity. Those who fall into this category must face the heartbreaking truth that in the current climate, the kind of witnessing done at General Conference 2000 is not productive and may be counterproductive. The issue is not whether demonstrating lacks moral valor and spiritual value, but only whether it is efficacious in terms of meeting the basic inclusionist

goal of gaining access. As this article and the research on which it is based suggests, I fear that political activism within the church will not change enough hearts and minds in the short-term to effect positive legislative change.

If the primary goal is changing hearts and minds, the following strategies should be on the discussion table.

### *Strategies*

**Focus on the grassroots:** One self-identified moderate told me that, "stateways don't change folkways." Behind this sociological jargon is the idea that inclusionists who want to keep up the good fight in the most strategically useful way should deprioritize working

at the legislative level of General Conference and focus instead on local churches and grassroots networks. I agree wholeheartedly. We should be directing much of our energy toward making individual congregations welcoming and empowering for LGBT Methodists. As the experience of the last 30 years suggests, it is possible to have individually prophetic churches, even with antigay rules on the books. Sociologist Stephen Warner (1995:94) notes the conclusion of many gay Christian activists that the struggle for LGBT recognition must move to the congregational level. Similarly, UCC pastor and sociologist Gary Comstock's (1996:77) study of LGBT United Methodists indicates that, "local congregations can resist and neutralize somewhat denominational policy." This is taking place in U.S. Methodism, and should be supported with all possible vigor.

**Change the nature of witnessing:** James Wood, a United Methodist pastor and sociologist, argues (2000:83-84) that minds are changed about homosexuality through the enlarging of personal circles. This argument is supported by research showing that heterosexuals who know LGBT people are more likely to be accepting. Perhaps the most important thing that can be done to make local congregations welcoming on this front is for LGBT Methodists to simply be present and engage in church life while being as open—yet relaxed—as possible about their sexuality. Consider this quote from "Marty," a conservative delegate:

*I don't think [LGBT Methodists] should stand on the corner and say I'm an avowed gay homosexual and wave the flag, because I think in a lot of people's thinking that closes a lot of doors. I know within my own church we have several people who I know are gay. They're in leadership roles. They don't go 'round carrying that chip on their shoulder.*

Marty's suggestion and language may be infuriating to many of us, but sociologically speaking, he has a point. If the goal of most inclusionists is a safe and meaningful local worship experience, Marty may be providing a sense of how to meet that goal. As politically

unsatisfying as it may be, finding ways to maintain one's dignity without formally seeking access could potentially be the solution for at least some LGBT Methodists.

**Accentuate the normal:** LGBT United Methodists should continue to demonstrate, both in word and action, that they are as tired of this struggle as the Evangelicals are, and that their local church priorities are those of "normal, reasonable" Methodists: worship, Sunday School, evangelism and so on. Indeed, my research suggests that many LGBT Methodists already feel this way, even as they remain committed to political change strategies. Minimizing the political language and logic could only help: the more the average heterosexual Methodist in the pew sees that the average LGBT Methodist has "normal" Methodist feelings about the church, the more likely the heterosexual Methodist is to treat the LGBT Methodist "reasonably," as a brother or sister in Christ.

**Evangelize:** If inclusionists want to change the way the United Methodist Church views homosexuality, one key strategy is to engage in major evangelizing projects among heterosexual progressives and LGBT people, whether churched or unchurched. The denomination's inclusionist element is not going to grow proportional to the denomination as a whole without bringing in more inclusionists from outside the church.

**Grieve:** The denomination's refusal to repent of its homophobia and heterosexism is heartbreaking, and we should allow our hearts to be broken over it as often as necessary. Most United Methodists don't have "hearts of stone," as was said by some after General Conference 2000, but most Methodists also have not had the experiences we have, and they don't see what we see. Until we fully and deeply grasp this fact and mourn it, we will not be able to forgive those who seem bent on misunderstanding us. Until we forgive them, I fear that we will not be able to meet them where they are, rather than where we want and need them to be. Until we can meet them where they are, we run the risk of making strategically problematic decisions.

## *A Word of Hope*

Following a discussion about my research, some Presbyterian inclusionists asked how, given this information, they could offer a word of hope to other inclusionists. As I have mulled over this question, I have been strangely comforted by the idea that God's realm is simultaneously now and not yet. Sociologically, the news may be bad (though it may also be more complicated than the story I've told here). Nonetheless, Jesus says that all things are possible with God. One of my inclusionist interviewees, a pastor, talked about a professor in seminary who walked into class on the first day, tore the back cover off a Bible, and told the class that the story wasn't over yet. The inclusionist story isn't over yet either. I'd say it's only just beginning. ▼

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