

Seven Ways of Looking at the United Methodist LGBT Inclusion Struggle

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Thank you very much for inviting me to speak, and for that introduction. I am delighted to be here, and to kick off this series about homosexuality and religion, a topic that many people consider the most controversial and troubling issue facing the Christian church today. Other speakers may address this topic from a personal perspective or consider Biblical interpretations; I, in contrast, will focus on analyzing legislative resistance to full, formal inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in the United Methodist Church. By the way, since that's a mouthful, I'll stick with LGBT to save us some time. I will end, however, with some personal reflections.

I'm interested in resistance primarily because of the nature of the struggle. What these LGBT Methodists want is to be Christians as they feel God is calling them to be Christians. They want to be allowed to serve as openly LGBT pastors in the church. They want pastors to bless their longtime relationships by celebrating holy unions, as a religious alternative to legal marriage. Above all, they want to stop being told that, 'homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.' This struggle is not an effort to seek approval of so-called promiscuity, or to get Methodist Evangelicals to applaud the semi-naked men and women in gay pride parades around the country. Rather, these issues are, for LGBT Methodists and their allies, a rock-bottom issue of inclusion in the Christian church. For that reason, I will call this group the inclusionists. On the other side of the struggle are Evangelical and conservative Methodists, who are dedicated to maintaining the traditions of the United Methodist Church. As they see it, this means that Christianity does not permit the blessing of same-sex holy unions, the ordination of LGBT pastors, or the condoning of homosexuality. I'll call this group the inclusion resisters. So far, the resisters have managed to get the church to formally, legally, reject inclusion on these points. My doctoral research was largely focused on answering one simple, so I thought, question: why the resistance? Why turn away men and women who pray, practice a range of spiritual disciplines, serve the church in many ways, and believe fiercely in Christian and specifically United Methodist doctrines? This matter is what I want to consider today, by addressing at greater or lesser length seven ways of approaching this struggle.

One approach is to see the resistance as simple, straightforward homophobia and heterosexism that just happens to be taking place in the church in this particular case. The "homophobia" part of this equation is what some people call the "ick factor" that attaches to homosexuality, the thing that makes even many liberal heterosexuals cringe a bit the first time they see a real same-sex kiss. Homosexuality, by this light, is just gross, and certainly should not be encouraged in any way. The "heterosexism" part involves status inequality, the idea that heterosexuals *as people* are better and more deserving than non-

heterosexuals. LGBT people are fine to ignore, devalue and oppress, because their feelings don't really matter, because they in fact don't really matter. Consider a joke I overheard during my fieldwork that relies on the disparaging term "fruits" for LGBT people: "California is "a bowl of granola, made up of fruits, nuts and flakes," according to one United Methodist Evangelical. So much for Christian charity and loving your enemy, huh? Maybe the story is just this simple – plain old prejudice through and through. Maybe what we have here is prejudiced people and victims of prejudice.

Or maybe not. In fact, probably not. In studying this struggle, I found that the people most bothered by homosexuality were always straight white men. Maybe the homophobia and heterosexism are real, but maybe they are not the root problem. Maybe the root problem is actually sexism. Some feminist inclusionists, both male and female, certainly thought so; one noted that, "This is all a matter of white male gender anxiety." This type of analysis relies on the idea that, especially for men, homophobia is a component of a larger struggle around masculinity. I happen to teach a course on masculinity at Colorado College, and I'm pretty convinced that when straight white men find homosexuality problematic, it has something to do with homosexuality threatening their masculinity. Sexism, after all, hurts men and not just women; it hurts men by requiring them to fit into relatively limited boxes of what it is acceptably masculine to think, to feel, to do, and to believe. Homosexuality is not a legitimate component of the "Act Like a Man" box. Perhaps the best analysis of the United Methodist struggle is that it is about, to repeat the quote above, "white male gender anxiety." Perhaps we have sexists here, and victims of sexism.

But not so fast. These analyses are awfully unfair to the inclusion resisters. After all, it says that homosexuality is a sin, right there in Genesis and Leviticus, and Romans. Maybe the inclusion resisters are just good Christians. Here are their voices on the issue:

"Homosexuality...is wrong, it is a sin, it is non-Biblical, and my convictions are non-negotiable."

"To maintain my integrity, I just can't say [homosexuality] is okay. I would not be true to myself [or] to my understanding of Scripture."

An analytic perspective that respects the inclusion resisters rather than just writing them off as oppressors has much to commend it. It takes their perspective seriously, and it lets me practice loving my enemy. So, a third perspective is that the resistance is just Christians doing what Christians do because their faith demands it.

What, however, if this struggle is not about faith? What if it is instead about politics? What if this tale is just one chapter in a very long book entitled, "The Religious Right Takes Over the United States of America?" After all, many of the conservative and Evangelical Methodists at the forefront of this struggle are in fact involved with the Religious Right more broadly. Certainly, several inclusionists held this analysis, including one who said:

“Homosexuality is not a real issue in the church, but a wedge issue being used by the conservatives...in the same way that Pat Robertson uses ‘the gay agenda’ in his fundraising letters. With the fall of communism, the religious right needs an agenda, and gays are it.”

From this perspective, this struggle is not about simple prejudice, masculine anxiety or religious piety; it is about power grabbing, and the inclusionists happen to be the wedge issue of the moment.

Now, I’ve just whipped through four scenarios that explain the resistance to full welcome of LGBT people into the life of the United Methodist Church. These scenarios are not entirely without merit, but each of them is one-sided; there’s a hero and a villain in each case, and life is not usually that simple. The joy and frustration of sociology is that it always says, “Is that *it*? Are you *sure*?” A devoted sociologist must always say, “No, I am not sure,” especially when she really, *really* wants one side to be right. It’s this little thing called humility, and sociologists must practice it even if they are not Christians. Here, then, are two analyses that take both sides seriously but see them as caught up in different meaning systems or different institutional logics.

How many of you have heard the phrase, “culture wars?” One broad way of defining culture wars is as cultural conflict rooted in different basic systems of moral understanding. Note that this is a far broader matter than whether Christianity specifically supports or opposes homosexuality. The term “culture wars” may have been developed by James Hunter in his book of the same name. Hunter contrasts orthodoxy with progressivism; these definitions apply clearly to resisters and inclusionists, respectively.

- Orthodoxy can be defined as “commitment on the part of adherents to an eternal, definable and transcendent authority,” and it involves believing in “certain non-negotiable moral ‘truths’”
- Under progressivism, “truth tends to be viewed as a process, a reality that is ever unfolding.” Progressives tend to “resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life” because “the language and programmatic thrust of traditional faith...is [not entirely] relevant for modern times” in their perspective.

If you consider the following two quotes from inclusion resisters, you will see that some of them had a culture wars analysis of their own situation:

“Do we believe that God meant what God revealed to those who wrote the Bible, or do we say no, we have a better idea, our sociopolitical knowledge [and] expertise has taught us that we know better than what the writers of the Bible knew?”

“For those who take the Bible as the final arbiter of truth...to change on [homosexuality] means you give up not only on this position but on every other position on which they believe the Bible speaks clearly. People on the other side, the argument is [that] our experience tells us that the Bible is in fact

incorrect in this position and therefore they're saying, my experience is more important than the Scripture." Perhaps the resisters are simply orthodox in the sense that Hunter is using the term above.

Since completing my dissertation, I have encountered two other general analyses of religious conservatives that flesh out Hunter's approach: Doug Muder's insights about choice versus obligation as liberal and conservative life strategies, and George Lakoff's characterizations of conservative "strict father" morality and liberal "nurturant parent" morality. Before moving on, I'd like to say just a bit about Muder's and Lakoff's perspectives separately.

Muder points out that for religious conservatives, relationships of all sorts are seen and acted upon as given rather than chosen. Conservative communities are communities of obligation, and any particular moral absolutes (of which there are many) are always understood in the larger context of obligation as keeping society together. Here, it's helpful to remember how sin-driven conservative religion is. From a conservative religious perspective, fallen humanity is not capable of creating a successful society in the absence of obligations to which one hews. Gender roles and sexual practices are understood to be among the timeless absolutes, and homosexuality (for example) does not merely fail to fit a particular gendered paradigm, it actually renders the paradigm meaningless. From such meaninglessness, it is a short step to deciding that the obligation system itself is meaningless, a determination that is terrifying to religious conservatives. If homosexuality is acceptable, then where will we stop? Many inclusion resisters actually made this point, sometimes in so many words. Perhaps, then, inclusion resisters reject inclusion because it is seen as an attack on the United Methodist version of the obligation system.

One final culture wars approach can be seen in the work of George Lakoff. In the book *Moral Politics*, Lakoff claims that conservative and liberal politics are largely based on what he calls "strict father" morality and "nurturant parent" morality, respectively. Should the government teach self-discipline and punish single mothers, for example, or should it strive to provide all people with the support they need to live fulfilling lives? The strict father God is punitive and focused on making people obey rules, while the nurturant parent God freely offers the metaphorical nurturance of grace and invites humans to nurture in God's spirit. Sin for the strict father God is the breaking of rules. Sin for the nurturant parent God is the failure to nurture others. Perhaps this gender-inflected type of culture war is going on in the United Methodist Church, and inclusion resisters simply see God as demanding adherence to Biblical rules because God is the sort of God that does this. In this case, both sides are being faithful to their image of God, but the resister image happens to not accept homosexuality.

All of these versions of the culture wars approach treat both sides respectfully, and for our purposes help clarify how well-meaning Methodists can be utterly dedicated to preventing LGBT inclusion. But there is one more analytic level to address. Sociologists take care to distinguish culture

from social structure, and so we ought to consider structural issues here as well. In this case, that means examining religion and political democracy as social institutions.

Here are some key sociological insights about institutions. Social actors, which is a fancy way of saying human beings, don't choose who we are, what we do, what we value and what we believe. Rather, these aspects of human life are significantly shaped by such institutions as religion, education, the media, the family, and others. An institution is not reducible to one example of it – for example, First Congregational Church in Colorado Springs may be an example of religion, but it is not identical with religion as a whole. Religion and, indeed, each other institution is the sum of a great many activities and behaviors, symbols, ways of thinking about things, priorities, and even consciousness. While many institutions coexist easily with one another, it is possible for institutions to be in conflict, when they differ somewhat, or even to be in contradiction, when they differ entirely from one another.

One way of understanding the resistance to Methodist LGBT inclusion is to see that from the resisters' eyes, the inclusionists are bringing an institutional logic into the church that is not of the church: the logic of democratic politics. The inclusionists rely on understandings of fairness, justice, discrimination, oppression, homophobia, bigotry, persecution, inequality and second-class citizenship in their claims that the church should welcome them. While they also appeal to the all-inclusive love of Jesus, his good news for the oppressed, and his prioritizing of love over law, their language is largely political. We have not yet heard from inclusionists this morning; let's do so now.

“[LGBT people are singled out] for special discrimination...the mistreatment of gay men and lesbians by the United Methodist Church...is a matter of bigotry, injustice, a poverty of compassion and the failure of our witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. To say to lesbians and gay men that they must wait for justice...is to trivialize the persecution and oppression they experience.”

“We see this debate in the church as a struggle for justice...we felt an instruction was being given to remove members of our congregations from full membership in the United Methodist Church into a second class status...”

I encountered literally hundreds of examples of this kind of language, language that is unacceptable to resisters because they feel that democratic politics are “of this world,” and therefore dangerous to the purity and holiness of true religion. Even worse, inclusionists disrupted the working of the church in protest of their continuing exclusion. Such actions clearly disrespected the church, and suggested greater allegiance to the so-called gay identity than to Jesus Christ. From a resister's perspective, if the democratic politics of inclusion win, “the world” is allowed into the church so deeply that the church is no longer distinct, pure, holy and set apart – and thus it is no longer really the church. This institutional protection seems to be at the heart of at least some of the resistance to inclusion, along

with irritation at the inclusionists' apparent misunderstandings of Christianity. Consider the following quotes from resisters:

“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 wrong, but only a matter of discrimination. I get a feeling that we're confusing civil rights issues with theological issues.”

“I could understand complete acceptance if we were a civil group or secular organization, but we are not. We are the church of Jesus Christ. Our mandates come not from finite human invention but from the Infinite One. We are not a democracy but a Theocracy!”

“It's not about civil rights, it's about holiness.”

“The church is a called-out people with a mission and ministry different from those of all other communities, institutions and agencies...essentially, the church is in a different business [where] anything short of God's high standard for holy living, including sexual purity, is sin.”

“Our...statement on homosexuality (as it now stands) is the glue holding our denomination together. If this statement were to be altered in such a way as to remove the biblical prohibition against homosexuality, then the United Methodist Church as we now know it would be no longer.” Think about that one. Removing this single prohibition would literally destroy the church. Something very significant must be going on here.

Perhaps, then, resisters see inclusionists as doing something that is not of the church as an institution. Homosexuality is a problem, to be sure, but maybe not the only problem in this case. The church is supposed to be above politics more generally, to have its focus on higher things. One does not merely oppose LGBT inclusion because one is a Christian, and thus opposes homosexuality; rather, one knows and trusts that one is really a Christian *because* one is opposing LGBT inclusion and the political logic that inclusion seems to require. The distinction here is subtle, but, I think, important. By this analysis, resisters are not, or are not merely, homophobes and sexists. They are not merely following Christianity or strategically seeking power. While they are certainly responding to a moral logic that is experienced as “non-negotiable,” to recall an earlier quote, they are also responding to an institutional logic by seeking to protect the church as an institution from the world. Resisters and inclusionists both encounter the church as an institution, but they do so very differently, and as such have different priorities about what the institution must do in order to do the right thing. Such an analysis both allows the possibility of respect for both sides and suggests that if the church is to become more inclusive, this will have to happen locally rather than legislatively.

Such is the long night of pain for inclusionists – 34 years so far [as of 2006], and going strong. But it would not be right for me to end this talk with bad news, especially not in an inclusionist Christian

setting. Thus, the seventh way of understanding the struggle: as an incredible pastoral, evangelical, and spiritual opportunity for all Christians.

First, reflecting on the LGBT inclusion struggle in the United Methodist Church, and in Christianity more broadly, can be a way of reflecting on the Christian faith stance that there is truly love at the core of all things. Such reflection can also lead to increased discernment about the spiritual fruits that all people may make manifest in their lives. Additionally, I see reflection on this struggle as an opportunity to develop awe and humility in the face of these people unwelcome to take up their gifts in the church, who nonetheless work endlessly to gain legitimate access, suffer rebuke and rejection regularly, and keep at it – specifically so that they can be good Christians as they understand this call. Reflecting on this struggle also offers an opportunity for heterosexual Christians and LGBT Christians to pastor to each other in ways that acknowledges both the similarities and differences between them. I can't imagine a response to the kind of reflection I'm proposing that does not culminate in energetic attempts to spread a truly Christian gospel that wholeheartedly welcomes LGBT people. But you already know all about this.

During my research, I met a pastor who told me that, on the first day of his Bible class in seminary, the professor walked in, tore off the back cover of a Bible, and told the class that the story wasn't finished. If indeed revelation is not sealed and the story continues, we can hope and trust that the end of this particular story will not be bad news for either the inclusionists or the resisters, but will somehow be good news for everyone. After all, nothing is impossible with God.