

**Queering Ethics, Ordination, and Church:
Rethinking the Terms of LGBTQ Ordination in the United Methodist Church**

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The life of ordained ministry is often described as a calling. Such language is deeply spiritual with significant implications for individuals and communities. It takes what is felt inwardly at such a personal level and presents it outwardly in the shape of formal ministry. While it is possible to romanticize the profound nature of the prompting and inspiration for ordained ministry, the reality of denominational polity brings ordination to a practical level that places stipulations and constraints on how an individual might live out her or his calling. While the intention of polity is largely to define a common purpose for the Church and to lay out ways in which that vision might best be fulfilled, the details can sometimes hinder the sense of call one has for ordained ministry. Perhaps the most potent contemporary example is the policy in a majority of denominations to refrain from ordaining persons in non-celibate same-sex relationships. In such cases, the reality of ministering in relation to and accord with denominational polity is played out dramatically through the very question of whether ordained ministry is an option. The significance of United Methodist polity can be vividly understood through thinking and rethinking how a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer person devoted to ministry might come to a decision on the ethical and personal appropriateness of seeking ordination.

A daunting question faces LGBTQ people who are considering ministry: is it ethical to make an oath declaring agreement with UMC polity while knowing that one's way of living might violate that polity? When candidates for ordination take, not just

their calling seriously, but the whole of their oath to live within the parameters of UMC polity, is it unethical for one to join in making a promise with the clear understanding that it is personally problematic? The question immediately begs for a definition of the UMC's polity regarding ordination and homosexuality. The *Book of Discipline* states explicitly:

The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church. [...] "*Self-avowed practicing homosexual*" is understood to mean that a person openly acknowledges to a bishop, district superintendent, district committee of ordained ministry, board of ordained ministry, or clergy session that the person is a practicing homosexual.¹

In regard to polity, the ethical dilemma above is whether or not a candidate for ordination is violating the integrity of the UMC when that person answers that s/he knows, approves, and will support and maintain the discipline and polity of the Church with the express knowledge that s/he might live in a way "incompatible with Christian teaching."²

The challenge of church polity is that, while polity might be useful in order to give an overarching sense of the Church's mission and how it intends to fulfill its goals, polity is formed out of and creates its own ethical dilemmas. When the Church faces challenges, it discerns a response and produces a statement to guide the direction of the Church. Out of debate over the appropriateness of ordaining LGBTQ persons, the UMC has declared its own position. However, polity is not impervious to the claim that it can function unethically. For example, it is possible that someone denied ordination on account of her sexuality might make the case that the Church violates her fundamental humanity. Polity is not immune from being implicated in ethical dilemmas.

¹ ¶ 304.3

² Answering to knowledge, approval, and support of UMC polity is drawn from "Historical Examination for Admission into Full Connection and Ordination as Deacon," ¶ 330.4d.

The idea that polity can be unethical is a useful way for an individual to think about ordination while wrestling with tensions between personal beliefs/practices and the Church's teaching. Framing the ethical dilemma as posed in the introductory paragraphs places an unfair burden upon the individual by defining ethics based solely upon the individual's commitment to upholding denominational polity. In such a light, the option to proceed with ordination while refusing to refrain from non-celibate same-sex relations is highly suspect because it blatantly disregards the Church's position on homosexuality. The ethical dilemma is entirely unbalanced, leaning all responsibility in the direction of the individual. However, by considering that church polity itself might be unethical because it excludes a person solely based upon sexuality and refuses to acknowledge the full potential of LGBTQ individuals, the weight of the ethical dilemma becomes more balanced. Instead of worrying whether or not one's commitment to the Church is ethical on the terms of polity alone, LGBTQ candidates for ordination can focus their decision upon whether or not ordination is a good option personally.

There are many considerations that go into determining whether an option is good or bad, but the basic idea is that, ethical dilemma aside, individuals must strategize how to negotiate tensions. If beliefs and practices diverge from polity on the matter of ordination, a person must weigh for her or himself whether or not it is a good decision to stay in the denomination. Might it be a better option to seek ordination in a denomination that does not place restrictions on LGBTQ pastors? Or is the commitment one has for a particular tradition a compelling reason to face the challenges of working within a tenuous relationship?

Assuming the commitment to remaining within the church, it is possible to find creative ways of negotiating tensions over homosexuality. Thorough study and engagement with UMC polity reveal that differing interpretations of polity make room for a range of options. A person might not acknowledge her or his same-sex, non-celibate relationship to a bishop or other church leader, and so it would not be “self-avowed” according to the UMC statement; thus, it would not technically be in violation of church polity. The handling of polity is largely a matter of interpreting technicalities, and so it is possible to work with polity to strategize creative ways to deal with one’s situation.

When interpreting technicalities in consideration of contemporary experiences and understandings of gender and sexuality, the UMC statement that “self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates...” breaks down to a point of non-function. What does it mean to be a practicing homosexual? The Judicial Council’s Decision No. 920 attempts a definition, stating:

As part of the review which must occur under such circumstances [when one is a self-avowed practicing homosexual], the person making such a statement must be asked whether she is engaged in genital sexual acts with a person of the same gender. If such a person responds to that question affirmatively, she would have openly acknowledged to one or more of the persons enumerated in footnote 1 to ¶ 304.3 that she is a self-avowed practicing homosexual.

The Judicial Council’s definition of homosexual practice as genital contact between two people of the same gender is problematic on two fronts. First, a basic sociological definition of sexuality is desire. Aligned with this assumption, the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry offers the following definition of ‘homosexual’: “A person who is attracted to members of the same sex. Of or relating to sexual and affectional attraction to a member of the same sex. Appropriate in medical or

sexual contexts.”³ By defining homosexual practice around sexual contact, the UMC does provide the possibility for celibate homosexuals to practice ministry; however, it is clear that the UMC is not fully engaged with social understandings of sexuality that go beyond a narrow focus on sexual activity. Perhaps limiting the scope of homosexual practice to sexual contact frees the church of the severe implications arising from the possibility that, in terms of desire, all humans might experience “homosexual moments” to a certain extent, and thus no one candidate would be fit for ministry.⁴

A second problem with the language of the Judicial Council’s decision is revealed in the usage of the term ‘gender.’ *Gender* is now widely accepted within the fields of sociology and psychology to be a construction that is a play between biological impulses and dynamic social interactions. Such an understanding dismantles a binary conception of gender and suggests that all people possess traits traditionally associated with both female and male and that it is possible to perform gender apart from anatomic sex. *Sex* is the term used to describe the biological distinction between women and men, and even this binary is challenged by the reality of transsexed individuals. If one were to assume the fluidity of gender, it is entirely possible to argue that a person with female anatomy might understand herself/himself as gendered male (note the breakdown of language here). Though surely not intended by the Judicial Council, the language of genital contact between people of the same *gender* to constitute homosexual practice would not necessarily apply to contact between two people possessing characteristics of the same

³ The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry, “LGBT Terms and Definitions,” http://www.clgs.org/5/5_2.html.

⁴ The exclusive use of the word ‘homosexual’ is a clue that the UMC is not attuned to the reality of diverse expressions of sexuality.

sex when one is gendered female and the other male.⁵ Certainly the intention of the Judicial Council could be clarified by substituting ‘sex’ for ‘gender’ (though even sex is an unstable category), but the implication here is that the UMC is out of its league when talking about sex, gender, and sexuality. Understandings within the social and biological sciences are increasingly acknowledging a range of expressions and permutations of sex, gender, and sexuality that threaten to shatter the binary upon which UMC sexual polity is built, rendering it non-functional.

The language the UMC uses to talk about sexuality is evidence that it is clearly not ready or capable as a united body in the present time to consider the postmodern notions and realities of sex, gender, and sexuality discussed above. However, the technical problems of an outdated polity create an opening that makes it possible for an individual to creatively imagine how her or his ministry might fit within the Church. Once a person is able to envision how ministry might be possible and how it might look, it is necessary to think about whether or not such a path is good for the self.⁶ Ultimately, church authorities have the power to enforce polity, and until the Church explicitly recognizes the rights of LGBTQ persons to participate fully as ordained ministers, LGBTQ pastors will face definite challenges. Each person must decide for her or himself whether or not these difficulties are worth the continued commitment to the

⁵ This is not just a theoretical argument but a practical reality. The case of Thomas Beatie, a transgendered individual legally recognized as a man and lawfully married to a woman, can be used to demonstrate the breakdown of UMC polity. Beatie’s circumstance is especially relevant as he has retained female reproductive organs and is currently pregnant. If Beatie or his wife were to seek ordination in the UMC, they might be considered to violate the prohibition of homosexual practice as both possess female genitalia. However, they are legally recognized as a heterosexual, married couple. Polity ceases to function in this instance because it does not make room for such a complex reality. The salient point here is that, despite arguments against the ordination of those outside the norm of heterosexuality, sex, gender, and sexuality are socially, biologically, and religiously flexible categories. Refusing to adapt polity to the fullness of human possibility leads to the very breakdown of polity.

⁶ Another whole paper could and should address the idea that what is good for the self is ultimately positive for the church; what destroys the self destroys the community.

denomination. Remaining within an institution with the hope of transforming it can be a symbol of great respect and commitment, but it can also lead a person into painful situations. Individuals must assess for themselves if the desire to remain in partnership with the UMC is personally worth the emotional stress involved.⁷

There are many reasons a person might choose to stay within the UMC even though the Church does not recognize her or his full right to participate in ordained ministry. This level of commitment need not be diminished by an ethical concern that one's own ordination would somehow violate the integrity of the Church. The issue of the ordination of LGBTQ persons is wrought with ethical dilemmas on all levels, and it should not be the responsibility of individuals to bear the burden alone. For those persons who consider it the appropriate choice to remain and work within the UMC, their commitment to the Church, when finally matched with the Church's commitment to the full participation of its members, will continually shape and reshape an ethical polity that respects the integrity of both the Church and its individuals.

⁷ A person might also take hold of positive movements of the UMC on behalf of LGBTQ people. The statement in the Social Principles of the *Discipline* that "homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth" is affirming to the extent that one might hope for the eventual recognition of "sacred worth" in ordination. Anticipation of where the Church might be moving could reinforce the decision to enter into candidacy for ordination.