

Sizing up the impending schism in United Methodism

The United Methodist Church's (UMC) recent decision at a special session of its General Conference in St. Louis to turn down a proposal that would have allowed congregations to ordain gay clergy and ministers to officiate at same-sex marriages is likely to lead to a schism, with liberals either starting their own body or departing for more congenial networks of like-minded mainline churches—it's just a question of how much of a schism will take place. In the blog *Religion in Public* (February 26), political scientist Paul Djupe estimates that the United Methodists stand to lose more members and clergy than did the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in its schism of a decade ago, when conservatives comprising about 10 percent of its membership left the denomination, also over issues of gay rights. Djupe writes that United Methodists may lose double the amount that the ELCA did because the "liberal wing is larger in the UMC than was the conservative side of the ELCA. The liberal wing is also on the side of expanding rights, which is a dominant mode and powerful frame in American political life." He adds that "churches with younger overall congregations will be more likely to depart. This decision also comes at a time when national ties are frayed as they have not been in a long time, national trust continues at a low point, and people are walking away from traditional ties like never before."

Djupe speculates that there "is an outside possibility that all of those...United Methodists who are in favor of same sex marriage might depart. That may add up to something more like 40 [percent] of those in favor of same-sex marriage leaving. The total loss in that scenario would reach to something like 2.2 million members lost." He cites a *New York Times* report that "pastors and bishops in the United States are already talking about leaving the denomination and possibly creating a new alliance for gay-friendly churches." Djupe quips that such an organization "already exists, though people more often call it the Episcopal Church. It has some different ways of organizing the denomination and theology, but it's welcoming even of Lutherans so it's not far off."

An article in *The Atlantic* (February 26) throws some doubt on the prospect of a massive schism, noting that while “the United Methodist Church is often described as a liberal, mainline Protestant denomination, in reality, the body is much more split, even in the United States. In a poll of its American members, the denomination found that 44 percent of respondents described their religious beliefs as traditional or conservative, 28 percent said they are moderate or centrist, and 20 percent identified as progressive or liberal.” The survey didn’t ask directly about LGBTQ issues, but they clearly invoke these theological dividing lines in the denomination. Writer Emma Green adds that “[w]orldwide, those numbers would likely shift even more toward a so-called traditional perspective. The United States accounts for roughly 60 percent of the UMC. At the General Conference in St. Louis, pastors from global communities were resolutely opposed to same-sex marriage and LGBTQ clergy.”

