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“A Mysterious Gift of God’s Grace:” Sexuality and Ordination in United Methodism

Kristina Sinks

The United Methodist Church (UMC) has officially denounced homosexuality since 1972. The Bishop Melvin E. Wheatley, Jr.’s pioneering work toward LGBTQ inclusion, however, remains significant almost forty years later. Wheatley was the leader of the Rocky Mountain Annual Conference (regional body) of the UMC from 1972–84.¹ After appointing the UMC’s first openly gay pastor in Denver in 1981, Wheatley wrote a letter to his clergy colleagues that explicitly stated his conviction that homosexuality is not a sin, despite the church’s anti-homosexual teachings. In this incendiary statement, Bishop Wheatley challenges the audience’s conceptions of LGBTQ identities and religion by disassociating sexual orientation from the spiritual gifts that make an individual fit for ministry in the UMC. Wheatley’s actions set a precedent of dissent within the UMC, forging a path towards LGBTQ ordination, although the official stance of the church remains exclusionary.

In his letter, Wheatley first addresses the question of whether homosexuality is a sin. To put his statements in context, it is important to understand that the UMC’s *Book of Discipline* “considers homosexuality [...] incompatible with Christian teaching,” and this statement implies that sexual orientation is a matter of choice.² Wheatley, on the other hand, argues that homosexuality is not a choice, and that “sexual orientation is a mysterious gift of God’s grace, communicated through an exceedingly complex set of chemical, biological, chromosomal, hormonal, environmental, developmental factors totally outside [our] control.”³ By establishing

¹ Elaine Woo, “Melvin E. Wheatley Dies at 93; Methodist Bishop Caused a Stir by Appointing Gay Pastor,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Mar. 15, 2009.

² *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church: 2012*, ed. Neil M. Alexander (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), 111.

³ Melvin Wheatley, letter to clergy colleagues, Nov. 20, 1981, quoted in Lee Hart Merrick, *Julian Rush – Facing the Music: A Gay Methodist Minister’s Story*, (Lincoln: Writers Club Press, 2001), 57–60.

some possible influences on sexual orientation, he counters the commonly held assumption that homosexuality is a sinful choice made by people going against God's will. Wheatley's bold assertion that sexual orientation is an immutable trait counters the *Discipline's* idea of homosexuality as a choice.

Second, Wheatley examines "the appointability [of...] a person of same sex orientation" as a pastor of a church.⁴ Wheatley makes the point that a person's sexual orientation has no bearing on whether or not they would make a good minister. He argues that "if all [he] knows about a person is that that person's sexual orientation is same sex rather than other sex, that tells [him] absolutely nothing [...] as to that person's dependability, honesty, kindness, truthfulness, [...] or compassion."⁵ By saying that a person's sexual orientation has no influence on that person's character, Wheatley rejects his era's common conceptions of LGBTQ immorality and directly opposes the UMC's teaching of homosexuality as incompatible with Christian teaching. Wheatley takes the assumption that homosexuality and Christianity are diametrically opposed and turns it on its head, while in the process calling out the UMC for focusing on sexual orientation as a measure of eligibility for ordination.

Wheatley's letter to his clergy colleagues was just one incident in a series of rebellious actions that opened the door toward advocacy for full LGBTQ inclusion. A few years earlier, he was the lone bishop refusing to sign a statement by the Council of Bishops declaring their support for the "incompatibility" wording in the *Discipline*; Wheatley had the courage to stand for what he believed was right even though doing so would put his career and credentials at risk.⁶

⁴ Melvin and Lucile Wheatley, interview by Mark Bowman, *LGBT-Religious Archives Network website*, transcript, Oct. 10, 1994.

⁵ Wheatley, letter to clergy colleagues.

⁶ Melvin and Lucile Wheatley, interview by Mark Bowman, *LGBT-Religious Archives Network website*, transcript, Oct. 10, 1994.

Additionally, Wheatley not only appointed the Rev. Julian Rush to a new UMC in Colorado after Rush was outed in 1981, but he also ordained the first openly lesbian pastor in the UMC, Rev. Dr. Joanne Carlson Brown, now a renowned theologian and scholar, the following year. These two ministers became leaders in the Colorado AIDS Project and in Affirmation, a group of LGBT United Methodists and allies, using their positions as ministers to work towards the wellbeing of all LGBTQ people.⁷

Additional research situates Wheatley's letter and actions within a larger tradition in the UMC that has allowed for dissenting minority voices to be heard throughout the UMC's ongoing struggle over homosexuality. Wheatley's refusal to sign the Council of Bishops' statement condemning homosexuality in 1978 follows the structure of civil disagreement described by sociologists of religion James R. Wood and Jon P. Bloch. In this structure, "participants, though deeply divided on some issues, have some common ground on which to stand during their debates."⁸ Wheatley reminds the other bishops of the common humanity shared with LGBTQ people, something that they all can agree upon, even if there is disagreement on the sinfulness of homosexuality.⁹ In accordance with Wood and Bloch's research, sociologist Amanda Udis-Kessler illustrates the dissent that took place at the UMC's General Conference in 2000.¹⁰ Udis-Kessler's research shows, like Wheatley's, that participants are committed to working for change

⁷ R. W. Holmen, *Queer Clergy: A History of Gay and Lesbian Ministry in American Protestantism* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2013), 474–478.

⁸ James R. Wood and Jon P. Bloch, "The Role of Church Assemblies in Building a Civil Society: The Case of the United Methodist General Conference's Debate on Homosexuality," *Sociology of Religion* 56, no. 2 (1995): 124.

⁹ Melvin Wheatley, "A Statement to the Council of Bishops," *LGBT-Religious Archives Network website*, Nov. 16, 1978.

¹⁰ The UMC's "General Conference is the top policy-making body [that] can revise church law, [...] adopt resolutions on current moral, social public policy and economic issues, [and approve] plans and budgets for church-wide programs." ("General Conference 2016," *UMC.org*, accessed May 9, 2016, <http://www.umc.org/topics/general-conference-2016>).

from within the UMC, even if it means their voices remain in the minority.¹¹ These same findings are echoed by Wood and Bloch in their research on the 1992 General Conference.¹² Wheatley's revolutionary work also strongly influenced later bishops who have decided to ordain LGBTQ clergy against the teachings of the church.¹³ While official policies of the UMC continue to condemn homosexuality, work of courageous leaders like Bishop Wheatley has led to some progress for LGBTQ individuals. The UMC has not yet become fully inclusive in its doctrines, but Wheatley's pioneering work is the catalyst for a growing community of dissent within the church.

Besides Wheatley's influence on dissenting opinions about LGBTQ inclusion in the UMC, his writing reflects society's changing views on homosexuality during the mid- to late-twentieth century. Wheatley asserts that homosexuality is an immutable trait, affected by a variety of influences that an individual cannot control, going against the UMC's assumption that LGBTQ individuals choose to engage in same-sex behavior that is contrary to the will of God. In his article "Misplaced Empathy: 'I Too Could Be Gay, If I Wanted,'" Juan Herrero emphasizes that, in coming to terms with homosexuality, empathy is necessarily different from placing oneself in the shoes of an LGBTQ individual. Instead, he stresses the importance of moving away from the idea of homosexuality as choice, which is precisely what Wheatley conveys in his letter to his clergy colleagues.¹⁴ Connecting his argument to current scientific and psychological research emphasizes Wheatley's work's relevance and importance in modernizing the UMC's views.

¹¹ Amanda Udis-Kessler, *Queer Inclusion in the United Methodist Church* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008).

¹² Wood and Bloch, 129.

¹³ *Queer Clergy*, 500.

¹⁴ Juan A. Herrero, "Misplaced Empathy: 'I Too Could Be Gay, If I Wanted,'" *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 39, no. 4 (2010): 19.

Bishop Melvin Wheatley's letter to his clergy colleagues in the Rocky Mountain regional division of the UMC expresses two important beliefs: homosexuality is not a sin, and sexual orientation has no bearing on an individual's eligibility for ordination in the UMC. By voicing these opinions, Wheatley challenged common ideas of his day about LGBTQ people and rejected the UMC's teachings against homosexuality. His outspokenness allowed later LGBTQ advocates to push for changes within the church and to set a precedent for later bishops to go against the church's teaching and ordain LGBTQ people. Bishop Wheatley's pioneering work showed his courage and his conviction that standing up for the marginalized was the right thing to do, providing an example that the UMC would be wise to follow today.

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