

# What Middle Am I In?

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Nearly 10 years ago, at a dinner in New York City, I was stunned when someone at my table declared clearly that there is really no point in dialogue or relationship with those whose beliefs will not be conformed to your own.

I didn't accept such a claim then and, as a person formed in and by the Wesleyan way, I don't accept that claim now.

Even so, during the recent Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference Session, I learned some of my colleagues were confused to find my name listed among the individuals who recently initiated a movement described as part of the "Methodist middle." [United Methodist News Service cited this movement as evidence](#) that "The United Methodist Church has a 'vibrant' center that can keep the denomination strong despite the damaging debates around division" over the issue of the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals in the life and clergy of the United Methodist Church.

On more than one occasion, a colleague said to me, "What 'middle' are you in?"

My first response is, "I am in the middle of the tradition!" Engagement with scripture through the Wesleyan, United Methodist tradition is the rich soil that nurtured my roots and supported my growth for more than four decades of my life. It's where I live. It's not "mushy" nor does it force me to give up on siblings to my right or to my left. Rather, the Wesleyan

way allows me – with all my convictions and conscience – to stay in mission and ministry with those who might prefer I just take my convictions and go.

I am in the middle of a tradition that affirms:

- “The church is a community of *all* true believers under the Lordship of Christ.”
- “The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world, and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission in that world.” (The Constitution of The United Methodist Church: Preamble, *The Book of Discipline*)

I am in the middle of a tradition that affirms:

- “Grace pervades our understanding of Christian faith and life.”
- “Scriptural holiness entails more than personal piety; love of God is always linked with love of neighbor, a passion for justice and renewal in the life of the world.” (¶102, Our Doctrinal Heritage: Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases, *The Book of Discipline*)

I am in the middle of a tradition that affirms:

- “Christian truth... stands revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal and corporate experience, and confirmed by reason.”
- “God’s eternal Word never has been, nor can be, exhaustively expressed in any single form of words.”
- “The crucial matter in religion is steadfast love for God and neighbor, empowered by the redeeming and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.” (¶103, Our Doctrinal History, *The Book of Discipline*)

I am in the middle of a tradition that affirms:

- “Our theological task is... critical in that we test various expressions of faith by asking: Are they true? Appropriate? Clear? Cogent? Credible? Are they based on love? Do they provide the Church and its members with a witness that is faithful to

the gospel and reflected in our living heritage and that is authentic and convening in light of human experience and the present state of human knowledge?

Our theological task is constructive in that every generation must appropriate creatively the wisdom of the past and seek God in their midst in order to think afresh about God, revelation, sin, redemption, worship, the church, freedom, justice, moral responsibility, and other significant theological concerns. Our summons is to understand and receive the gospel promises in our troubled and uncertain times.” (§105, The Nature of Our Theological Task, *The Book of Discipline*)

What I prefer to call the “centering” movement in The United Methodist Church is a middle where these *central claims* provide the ground upon which we stand, struggle, and strive for more perfect love to fill and fuel our witness.

People who know or observe my ministry are aware that I believe LGBTQ+ persons are “wonderfully made” ([Psalms 139:14](#)) in God’s image and are beloved children of God. I firmly believe that LGBTQ+ persons belong in the church at every level of leadership and bring unique gifts to the work of ministry. I believe that marriages between LGBTQ+ persons are the same high, holy calling as my own. Clearly, I am not “in the middle” or “on the fence” with regard to this struggle which is threatening to split The United Methodist Church.

Do I fear for the emotional, spiritual, and physical safety of LGBTQ+ persons in our church and society? Yes. Will I continue to advocate for LGBTQ+ inclusion in the life of the UMC? Yes. Do I wish that others would come to see in scripture the primacy of loving, mutual, and just covenant relationships regardless of orientation or gender identity? Yes. Will I push back on any word or action that does harm to LGBTQ+ persons? Yes.

Am I zealous to remain in relationship with those who intensely disagree with me? Yes.

For the sake of justice for LGBTQ+ persons, some of my deeply respected colleagues would prefer separation from the seemingly intractable and deeply broken UMC system. I am sympathetic to that perspective. However, I am also privy to the extraordinary witness of

LGBTQ+ persons in my congregation who love Jesus and love The United Methodist Church and are determined to stay in the struggle even as they are on the receiving end of so much indignity and injustice.

They strengthen my resolve to do what I have often called “the harder thing” required of us by the gospel: to stay connected as one Body and try to offer the world an alternative vision to the polarizing and warring ways of the world. (cf. [1 Corinthians 12](#), [John 17](#))

A dismembered body can't breathe, can't see, can't move, can't reach out to touch and care for the wounds of others. A dismembered body can't speak words of love or justice. A dismembered body won't have the capacity to engage in the struggle against racism, poverty, addiction, unemployment, homelessness, xenophobia, and lack of adequate healthcare. A dismembered body can't walk much less “run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” ([Hebrews 12:1-2](#))

The Body of Christ called The United Methodist Church is already weakened by cutting off the full participation of LGBTQ+ people. Further severing of the body through division, while tempting, would be the ultimate capitulation to a culture overwhelmingly characterized by “us” versus “them.” For biblical, evangelical, pragmatic, and missional reasons – and inspired by my LGBTQ+ colleagues and friends – I will at least try to do “the harder thing.” A broken world needs a whole body, even a body that has a long way to go toward perfection.

What middle am I in?

I am in the middle of the prophetic tradition, the Jesus tradition, the Wesleyan tradition, the United Methodist tradition. I am in the center of a tradition that believes the love and grace of God are big enough to hold and save us all. It's a strong, diverse, challenging place to stand. And I give thanks that there are so many across the connection who stand there too.