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Love et al. "Unity of the church and human sexuality: Toward a faithful united Methodist witness" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Love, J., et al. (2018). *Unity of the church and human sexuality: Toward a faithful united Methodist witness*. Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, the United Methodist Church. 554 pp. \$10.00. ISBN 9780038162483

The 26 contributors to this academic volume are mostly professors of religion and church history in The United Methodist Church seminaries and universities and related Wesleyan institutions who used these essays as a basis for discussions at a Colloquy on the Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, between March 9 and 12, 2017, on the subject of homosexuality. Emory had opened a Gay and Lesbian Student Life Office in 1992, offered domestic partner benefits in 1995, including healthcare, retirement, and other usual employee benefits, and then in 1997, opened its chapels for same-sex unions for those very few denominations who had rites for such a category, which did not include The United Methodist Church at the time, a practice it still does not allow to this day. Such actions produced the expected heavy negative church reactions against Candler, which despite fully abiding by all church law, remains defiantly proud of its support for LGBTQ persons' civil and human rights. Thus, the need for such a gathering to discuss a difficult topic and to collect its thoughts in this book.

With chapter titles like "In Defense of Mexit: Disagreement and Disunity in United Methodism," "The Clash among Unity, Inclusion, and Covenant: Lessons from History," and "Today's *Untied* Methodism: Living with/into/beyond its Two Centuries of Regular Division," many of the writers in this book fully expect, or at least fear, that this issue will split the UMC. For those denominations of a more Biblical literalist bent, Dr. Jan Love, the Dean of Candler School of Theology and President of The Association of United Methodist Theological Schools reminds readers in the Foreword that while the UMC is a church that ordains women to the ministry, it has split many times over issues such as race, slavery, biblical interpretation, national identity, divorce, war, etc., and yet still includes the following statements in its Book of Discipline, paragraph 161G: "The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching" and "self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church."

Most of the chapters take a historical view of controversial issues within the United Methodist Church, ruminating over the subjects mentioned above, looking back at other difficult subjects for wisdom on how the church handled them well or not. Probably the most insightful article, however, that actually wrestles with deeply felt emotional gut-reactions many church members have toward same-sex sexual activity is Dr. Lisa M. Allen-McLaurin's "Where Will You Go from Here?" in which she says even in a class about the study of homosexuality, they continued to express disapproval, if not disgust: "Many men, particularly, expressed hostile feeling toward same-gender loving men. . . . It is not the idea of two men loving each other, because many men will openly acknowledge their love for another man. It is the act of a man being penetrated in a similar way that women are penetrated during heterosexual sex. In a hierarchical understanding of male/female relations, many men believe the man is supposed to be the dominant partner, the penetrator during sex, and if a man is being penetrated, he must be taking on the "female" role in the relationship." With that deep sort of gut reaction to the subject, those wanting to teach an understanding approach to homosexuality have a challenge ahead of them.

This book is a weighty academic tome that few will bother to struggle through. It's probably most appropriate for libraries associated with United Methodist Church, but few others. To really understand the pros and cons of homosexuality, get the *Opposing Viewpoints Series* book titled "Homosexuality." Auriana Ojeda, Book Editor, Greenhaven Press, 2004, which does have two chapters, pro and con, on whether the Bible condemns homosexuality. Also consider "Reasonable and Holy: Engaging Same-Sexuality," by Tobias Stanislas Haller, Seabury Books, 2009, for further insights from the Episcopal Church, a denomination that blesses same-sex unions and ordains gays and lesbians to the priesthood and bishopric.

Reviewer

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