

The End of the United Methodists? Repeating the Boy Scouts Mistake?

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Author

[Dr. Jerry Bergman, PhD](#)

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Methodism began in 18th-century Britain by Anglican priest John Wesley (1703–1791). A group of students, including John and Charles Wesley plus George Whitefield, met at Oxford University to methodically study the Bible and practice living a moral and holy life. To more effectively take the gospel to the common people, John Wesley adopted what were then unconventional practices, including open-air preaching. He also formed small classes in which his followers were inculcated with intensive moral accountability in their personal lives. His preaching centered on the effects of faith and personal character, stressing striving for perfection during this life.

Methodism soon spread throughout the United States by early Methodist preachers, including Laurence Coughlan and Robert Strawbridge. Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury founded the Methodist Episcopal Church, which soon became the largest Protestant denomination in America. Wesley stressed that the Bible was the “inerrant” word of God and the complete authority in all matters of theology and morality.

All This Has Now Changed

The United Methodist Church (UMC) General Conference on May 1, 2024, voted with 93 percent approval (692 to 51) to repeal the 40-year rule against ordaining people who have openly stated they are homosexually active. The conference also approved removing penalties against clergy or churches for performing gay marriages. Delegates overturned a ban on LGBTQIA2S+ people's involvement in leading ministry and repealed the rule against using church funds to support pro-LGBTQIA2S+ causes. The vote also changed the scriptural definition of marriage from a covenant between a man and a woman to a union between two people of faith.

As of 2023, 7,631 congregations have left the American UMC due to these changes. In 2019 there were 30,541 UMS in the USA. Many more churches would leave except the church building and parsonage are owned by the UMC, requiring payment of many thousands of dollars to leave the denomination.

The reason for leaving include theological disagreements over the UMC's rejection of Biblical inerrancy, especially over allowing LGBTQIA2S+ to become ministers and bishops contrary to the 24 scriptures that address this issue.

Rejection of Biblical inerrancy also influenced the denomination's acceptance of human evolution as the creator of humans. As I documented in my book, *The Methodist Darwin Syndrome: Consequences of Adopting Darwinian Theology*, the UMC has long been actively supporting litigation that prevents scientific evidence against evolution from being presented in public schools and colleges.

The Boy Scouts Experience

The Boy Scouts of America's (BSA) experience accepting LGBTQIA2S+ persons as scoutmasters and leaders is instructive. The BSA were soon swamped with lawsuits for hundreds of sex abuse claims, forcing them to declare bankruptcy in 2020. They were forced to sell or mortgage virtually every asset they owned to pay the \$2.5 billion settlement.

The tragedy is, few voluntary associations in American history have had as deep and positive influence as the Boy Scouts. It was the training ground for soldiers, senators, pastors, and presidents. The organization has effectively instilled values of trustworthiness, loyalty, courteousness, thrift, bravery, and reverence in many of the over 100 million young men who joined over its 100-year history. In fact, for

much of the 20th century, “Scout’s honor” was among the highest assurances one could give of honesty and integrity.

The speed of the Boy Scouts of America’s decline, the fact that the decline continues virtually unabated today, and the amount of its debt, all put its survival in doubt. Even a million members may not be able to generate enough income both to pay for the quality program once offered and meet its mortgage obligations. In 2009, it cost \$10 to become a Boy Scout. Today, membership dues top \$100—and the uniform, camp, and other costs can run into the hundreds of dollars each year. These fee increases further shrank the number of kids who can afford to participate in their programs. The net effect, ironically, is that, as the Scouts became more progressive, they became less diverse and inclusive.

Although the growth of a new faith-based Scout-like organization *Trail Life USA*, which will not hire LGBTQIA2S+ to become scoutmasters, is encouraging, it is difficult not to lament the rapid implosion of the Boy Scouts. This once great institution of civil society is now lacking the size, organizational credibility, and moral persuasion it once had to positively influence public life.

The UMC is already facing numerous lawsuits related to claims against UM clergy and staff for molesting young boys. According to *The Sexual Abuse Litigation Group* at Schmidt & Clark, LLP law firm that focuses on representing plaintiffs in Methodist minister and clergy sexual abuse and molestation lawsuits, the Church has been involved in a number of sexual abuse scandals that have involved cover-ups and an unwillingness to report or confront abusers within the organization. The Schmidt & Clark law firm is currently accepting new cases in all 50 states. Of interest is their senior lawyer, Mike Schmidt, earned his law degree from Southern Methodist University’s Dedman School of Law. Some observers have concluded that the UMC will not survive much beyond the next decade.

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