The Dis-United Methodist Church
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The Methodist Church is the second largest Protestant denomination in the United States and in the world, with more than 12 million members in its most prominent component, the United Methodist Church. For many years, the church has had a stated position that homosexuality is “incompatible with Christian teaching.”

But in the United States, despite this assertion, LGBTQ clergy have been ordained and same-sex unions have been blessed in the United Methodist Church. A married lesbian, Karen Oliveto, serves as the ordained Bishop of the Mountain Sky region of the United Methodist Church, including Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, Utah and some of Idaho.

A worldwide general conference of the United Methodist Church, meeting in St. Louis in March, voted to reiterate and enforce the church’s policy against LGBTQ clergy and marriages. A church Judicial Council, which met in April, upheld the decision. Under this ban, LGBTQ clergy could be tried and suspended or defrocked for practicing their sexual orientation or even excommunicated for performing gay marriages. The full set of resolutions is here: umc.org/what-we-believe/ask-the-umc-what-did-the-judicial-council-decide-about-the-traditional-plan.

My great-uncle, Dr. Freeman Redinger, was a leader in the Methodist church—a minister, district superintendent, and dean of a ministerial college. My grandmother, mother and I have all continued in the Methodist tradition, belonging to the Lafayette United Methodist Church.

The slogan of the United Methodist Church is “open hearts, open minds, open doors.” The church I know preaches a message of tolerance and inclusion. Among the large and tolerant Methodist churches in the Bay Area is San Francisco’s Glide Memorial, known for celebrating diversity and ministering to the needy. In this version of the Methodist church, one tries to live a joyful life of service to others and respects all differences among people.

It is widely embodied in American society and U.S. laws that discriminating against anyone on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, physical or any other inherent characteristic is wrong. The U.S. Supreme Court has upheld the right of gay people to marry.

Among the Methodists I know, the reaction to the church’s recent declaration has been one of disbelief. Many clergy are distressed. The Bishop of Northern California and Nevada, Minerva Carcano, has said, “How can love for God be true when we reject those whom God has also created and called good? I believe that the full inclusion of ALL God’s children is the necessary first step to being the church God calls us to be.”

There is discussion of the church splitting into separate denominations, and the pronouncements this spring outlined an “exit plan” for individual churches to leave. Church leaders worry about an exodus from the church by LGBTQ members and their supporters.

One explanation for the exclusionary action of the United Methodist Church is the composition of the Methodist General Conference and Judicial Council. Both are weighted in favor of the conservative churches in the U.S. South and Midwest, with 5.6 million members, and heavily populated with representatives from the 5.3-million strong African churches. Thirty percent of Methodists worldwide are in Africa, where attitudes toward homosexuality are less tolerant than elsewhere in the world. The United Methodist Church in the more tolerant American West and Northeast has only around 1.5 million members.

None of the 8-member Judicial Council appears to be LGBTQ, and none of them appear to represent the broader American Methodist church, where 60 percent of members overall believe that homosexuality should be accepted.

One can’t help but wonder whether the overall climate of intolerance we are experiencing in the United States and worldwide, as former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright noted in her book Fascism: A Warning, is a factor in the timing of the decision.

Methodist church members are torn over whether to stay in the church or leave. When I think about this decision, I think of my husband’s and my close friend, former member of Congress and presidential cabinet member Norm Mineta.

In explaining why he went into politics, Norm frequently refers to his childhood in the Heart Mountain Internment Camp in Wyoming, where he was sent, at age 10, with his family as a Japanese-American detainee during World War II. He points out that at the time of the internment decision, there wasn’t a single Asian-American member of Congress. He explains that he went into politics, and has helped other Asian-American candidates, so that if a policy directly affecting Asian-Americans were on the table again, he and other Asian-Americans would have input into the decision.

My response toward the intolerance in the United Methodist Church is similar to Norm’s view. Before churches begin to secede from the denomination or congregants begin to leave, tolerant Methodists, including LGBTQ Methodists, need to try to get more seats at the table, in the Methodist General Conference and Judicial Council and other church bodies, so decisions like the recent one cannot stand. If the formulas for representation are weighted against tolerant Methodists, the formulas need to change. The cause of tolerance isn’t only important in our own personal environments, but in the institutions in our society as a whole.