

# Faithful Explorations Series: Reproductive Health and Abortion, Part 1

**By Rev. David Wiggs**

*Editor's Note: You may recall in 2016 when the church published the "Dealing With Controversy" column series, which looked at how we might engage with each other and our faith when we disagree on issues. The series used human sexuality as a case study for dealing with controversy within the body of Christ. Several years later, and it is clear that there are a number of topics which might benefit from faithful exploration, especially in our current politically divisive environment. This Faithful Explorations series was published in Boston Avenue's weekly newspaper as a starting point for exploring these challenging topics and social issues. As with the initial series, we recommend the tools of our Methodist heritage, including our United Methodist Book of Discipline, and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.*

I am writing this reflection in response to congregational requests that I help us think about the many facets of this important issue. Some will see this as partisan politics rather than spiritual guidance. Yet, I see it like this: *"The United Methodist Church has a long history of concern for social justice. Its members have taken forthright positions on controversial issues involving Christian principles"* (The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2016, p. 105). I wrote about Church and State and Christian prayer a while back.

Our United Methodist Church for years has provided profound guidance on the issues related to women and pregnancy—I will give an excerpt. *"The beginning of life and the ending of life are the God-given boundaries of human existence. While individuals have always had some degree of control over when they would die, they now have the awesome power to determine when and even whether new individuals will be born. Our belief in the sanctity of unborn human life makes us reluctant to approve abortion.*

*But we are equally bound to respect the sacredness of the life and well-being of the mother and the unborn child.*

*We recognize tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion, and in such cases we support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures by certified medical providers.*

*We call all Christians to a searching and prayerful inquiry into the sorts of conditions that may cause [women] to consider abortion. We entrust God to provide guidance, wisdom, and discernment to those facing an unintended pregnancy.*

*The church shall offer ministries to reduce unintended pregnancies. We commit our church to continue to provide nurturing ministries to those who terminate a pregnancy, to those in the midst of a crisis pregnancy, and to those who give birth.*

*We mourn and are committed to promoting the diminishment of high abortion rates. The church shall encourage ministries to reduce unintended pregnancies such as comprehensive, age-*

*appropriate sexuality education, advocacy in regard to contraception, and support of initiatives that enhance the quality of life for all women and girls around the globe” (The Book of Discipline of the UMC, 2016, p. 114ff).*

**Prayer: O God of Creation, may we seek and find your direction in each individual situation in which life is in conflict with life. Inspire us to think deeply, grow spiritually and love generously. May your presence be especially with women facing these important decisions in these difficult times.**

You can find the full United Methodist statement at [umc.org](http://umc.org).

# Faithful Explorations Series: Reproductive Health and Abortion, Part 2

Last week's piece printed about a quarter of the longer statement that is printed in the Book of Discipline of the UMC. I find it to be much more balanced, comprehensive, fair, and healthy statement than most that I have seen recently, sparked by the U.S. Supreme Court rulings related to these significant issues.

Our statement begins recognizing the complexities involved in these decisions. Part of the ongoing debate revolves around when does human life begin. The recent Court decisions presume that human life begins at conception. Yet, that is a philosophical or religious question. How do we determine when a mass of cells become a human person?

If, to be human, is to be a combination of soul and body, the question raised becomes: When does a **human** body gain a soul? Or when does human life begin? One answer in our tradition (rising from our Jewish ancestors) was upon first breath outside of the womb.

The Roman Catholic position holds that human life begins at conception. If that is correct, is a fertilized ovum that fails to attach or implant in the womb, a human death? It seems to be that there is **potential** for a human life present, but potential is something much different from human life, as we know it outside the womb. Further, once we start using potential as the criteria, then is the egg or the sperm also human life, since it contains the potential for human life? Where the line is drawn is a religious question.

Although there is to be no religious test for consideration to serve in the Court, it seems relevant to note that six of our current Supreme Court Justices are Roman Catholics by faith and one additionally was raised Roman Catholic. It seems to me that some of our current justices are prescribing law based upon their faith preferences versus legal precedent. Since these decisions are so closely related to religious definitions, the Supreme Court seems to be establishing one religious perspective as legal and ruling all others illegal. I believe it violates the religious freedom our country established from the beginning.

Further, if one frames the discussion of pregnancy, presuming **child** as the only proper name for a fertilized ovum, then you call abortion murder rather than ovicide. Using this starting point causes the rights of women to be greatly diminished. It ignores the women's right to her personal agency and responsibility and her rights to seek medical care for her own health and well-being. (Ironically, I have never heard a person argue that the government should make laws governing the health care choices of males in our society.)

*Prayer: O God of creation, may we seek and find your direction in each individual situation, in which life is in conflict with life. Inspire us to think deeply, grow spiritually and love generously. May your wisdom combine with our scientific knowledge as we engage our hearts and minds in a deeper inquiry during these difficult times.*

# Faithful Explorations Series: Reproductive Health and Abortion, Part 3

If we utilize our current medical knowledge to recognize that there are a great variety of stages through which cells grow toward becoming a fully formed human body then that brings greater sensitivity to the discussion. It provides a much more suitable frame to help us consider the rights of a woman who is pregnant in this broader discussion.

Our United Methodist statement clearly names the conflict of life against life. Then advises that we support a women's right to make choices about her own health care, including abortion. We support the legal right to abortion offered by certified medical providers as a proper medical procedure.

No one of us can understand all of the possible circumstances under which a woman may need to choose an abortion or under what circumstances a medical provider may recommend this as the best medical option. Yet, these recent rulings lump all circumstances together, as if they are similar enough not to make a difference; that is a gross over-generalization.

We also know from history and research a legal prohibition does not stop women seeking abortions. Nor does it stop abortions from being performed. We do know such a prohibition escalates the medical risks, increases the death rate and increases stress for women and families facing an unwanted or non-viable pregnancy. We also know where contraception and full medical services are available that the overall health of women and girls increases. Subsequently the overall health of the community flourishes.

Therefore, the United Methodist Church counsels all of us into a deeper inquiry as to the conditions that drive women toward this decision. In addition, we support crisis pregnancy centers that help women explore all their options. We also believe these highly individualized and personal decisions can be aided by God and encourage women to seek pastoral and other counsel, as well as, medical advice. Our statement also endorses parental involvement for underage girls.

The wider scope of the United Methodist guidance on this takes us beyond the individual's decision and encourages us, as a church, to work in society to reduce unwanted pregnancies through appropriate sexuality education, advocacy for healthy contraception and overall greater gender equity. All of these are ways we value and care for females in our world.

As my seminary ethics professor pointed out, ethics is only difficult when you have competing rights to consider. To grant absolute rights on either side of this debate I believe is a mistake. In fact, our Book of Discipline goes on to address ministry with all involved in these difficult decisions. In addition, we have a statement that addresses adoption as a related issue.

*Prayer: O God of creation, may we seek and find your direction in each individual situation, in which life is in conflict with life. Inspire us to think deeply, grow spiritually and love generously. May*

*your grace and compassion guide us as we strive to care for all involved in these complicated and life altering decisions, during these difficult times.*

You can find the full United Methodist statement at [umc.org](http://umc.org)

# Faithful Explorations Series: Indigenous Peoples' Rights

"The Social Principles, while not to be considered church law...are a call...to a prayerful, studied dialogue of faith and practice." "We affirm our unity in Jesus Christ while acknowledging differences in applying our faith in different cultural contexts as we live out the gospel." (p.105-106) (All citations used are from *The United Methodist Book of Discipline, 2016*)

This week, Monday was a federal holiday known as Columbus Day, and more recently, Indigenous Peoples' Day. Same holiday, considering the same story around our beginnings as a nation, yet from different perspectives on culture and race.

"The rights and privileges a society bestows upon or withholds from those who comprise it indicate the relative esteem in which that society holds particular persons and groups of persons." The Discipline says, as Christians, we desire to treat "all persons as equally valuable in the sight of God." On the topic of racism and discrimination, it then states, "We commend and encourage the self-awareness of all racial and ethnic groups and oppressed people that leads them to demand their just and equal rights as members of society." (p. 119-120) That causes me to think more deeply about our history with Native Americans or Indigenous Persons. The 1992 General Conference of the UMC raised awareness of the destructive practices used against Native Americans in the U.S. In the 2012 Conference an act of Repentance was offered. "As individuals are affirmed by God in their diversity, so are nations and cultures. We recognize that no nation or culture is absolutely just and right in its treatment of its own people, nor is any nation totally without regard for the welfare of its citizens...We affirm the right and duty of people of all nations to determine their own destiny." (p. 143)

Here in Oklahoma we have much to consider in our relationships with the many tribes present in our state. What do you think? I think we have some repair work to do.

It can be perplexing and surely is complicated to sort out the best way forward. If you read much of what I write, you know I find the guidance of our official church statements thoughtful, wise and helpful, as I learn more about these complex issues with competing claims.

May this be our prayer: "*We dedicate ourselves to peace throughout the world, to the rule of justice and law among nations, and to individual freedom for all people of the world.*" (p. 145)

# Faithful Explorations Series: Gender Identity

What does transgender mean?

I receive that question in a variety of ways from people in our congregation for a variety of reasons. They might have met someone who is transgender. They might have read something about LGBTQ+ folks and wonder what the “T” means. They might have heard someone condemning transgender people as sinners or ungodly. They may wonder, why it is such a controversy in our state or nation? They may have a family member who is transgender. They might be wondering why we have a place for people to identify their pronouns on our registration forms.

We do not have much in Scripture or our Tradition to help us understand this aspect of the human experience. Although there is the story of the Ethiopian eunuch (a person without genitalia), who converted to Christianity. The story is found in *Acts 8*. Philip, a disciple of Christ, feels prompted by the Spirit to go south out of Jerusalem. He meets the eunuch who asks for assistance understanding a reading from *Isaiah*. Philip helps this person and he asks to be baptized. They go down to some water and Philip baptizes the eunuch. This is one of the earliest converts to Christianity.

In Matthew 19:12, Jesus speaks of eunuchs from birth, by choice and forced. He then calls for acceptance of these people. So, that is a start.

When we think about birth, medical science can help us. It is easy to think people are either born with male or female genitalia. Actually, often people who want to condemn transgender people make this very argument that God created us one way or the other! Therefore, any deviation is a sin against God.

To simplify the science, let me summarize it like this. A person may be born with male genitalia or female genitalia. Or with a full set of both. Or some anatomy of both, some with more male parts, some with more female parts. Or some people are born without any genitalia. So there are at least six ways, anatomically, one might be born. Hence, why there can be anatomical confusion about biological sex. Although, gender is more than body parts. Gender has to do with identity.

I hope you can see why arguing for only two options is a great misunderstanding.

Additionally, this is why when welcoming people, it is important to give each person an opportunity to tell us the pronouns they use to identify themselves. This allows us to welcome individuals as who they are, not who we presume them to be.

Science helps us understand the difference in biological sex and gender identity and expression. We also know that chromosomes may or may not align with gender identity. Additionally, genitalia and brain hormones associated with maleness or femaleness do not develop at the same time during gestation. Most often, they match, but in some people they do not match. A person can be born with genitalia and brain chemistry which do not match. This can create a lifelong struggle to

come to clarity and peace about sexual orientation and gender identity. The struggle is rooted not only in internal conflict but having to express oneself in an unsafe world.

One example in my personal experience happened with a family coming home from church with their five year old. In Sunday School, they had read Psalm 139 and how we are *wonderfully made* by God. The teacher had said that God loves us, and so, has made us perfectly. The theme was we are all beautiful in God's sight.

The child recounted this. The parents listened. They affirmed the lesson. Then the child said, "But, with me, God made a mistake. I am in the wrong body."

Research indicates many transgender folks are aware of who they are by age 4. I would hope we can be a church that proclaims to all people, whatever their gender identity, they are beloved children of God.

Attacks on transgender people are cruel and contrary to our core Christian ethic of love. Whether it is a physical attack or an emotional attack or based on ignorance or discomfort or on some issue like bathroom usage, I believe it is a mistake and causes harm. Because people are different than you, is no reason to demonize, criminalize, exclude or label them as dangerous.

For those of us who have had the experience of our biological sex and gender aligning, it seems easy to throw everyone into the male/female binary, as that is our personal experience. Yet, when we study this further, we learn human sexuality and gender identity are far more complex than that. Thinking carefully and deeply here, reading and learning will serve us better than a rush to judgment. Love and compassion will serve us better than hate and exclusion.

Can we not make room for all of God's children? As we think about the scriptures cited above, what we can learn from science and our own experience, can we find a place in our hearts for people who may be different from us?

*Prayer: O God of all creation, "Help us to accept each other as Christ accepted us. Teach us, O Lord, your lessons as in our daily life we struggle to be human and search for hope and faith. Teach us to care for people, for all, not just for some, to love them as we find them, or as they may become." (UMH #560) Amen*



# Faithful Explorations Series: Immigration

I love the words on the Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Yet, now we find ourselves facing a more complicated and complex set of issues as populations grow, hunger plagues many parts of the world, travel from any part of the globe is more accessible, growing fears among Americans after 9/11, large numbers of people coming legally and illegally, which overwhelm our immigration systems. People seek to immigrate based on everything from seeking greater opportunity to escaping violence to family reunification to other less noble reasons.

Our United Methodist Social Principles do not deal with all of legislative issues surrounding immigration currently, but rather frame our stance as follows under the title *Rights of Immigrants*.

"We recognize, embrace, and affirm all persons, regardless of country of origin, as members of the family of God. We affirm the right of all persons to equal opportunities for employment, access to housing, health care, education, and freedom from social discrimination. We urge the Church and society to recognize the gifts, contributions, and struggles of those who are immigrants and to advocate for justice for all. We oppose immigration policies that separate family members from each other or that include detention of families with children, and we call on local churches to be in ministry with immigrant families (*The United Methodist Book of Discipline*, 2016, p. 122-123).

Most recently, Boston Avenue has been involved in a small way in settling Afghanistan immigrants into the Tulsa area. Some of our members have become deeply involved in these efforts and Trinity Woods (formerly Oklahoma Methodist Manor) has assisted with housing for these immigrants.

*The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church* from 2016 has further suggestions for individuals and churches as to how to get involved in this work and advocates for the "comprehensive reform of the US immigration system" (p. 291).

One of the suggestions in this section recommends "an increase in the number of visas for short-term workers to come into the United States to work in a safe, legal, and orderly way" including ways to legally extend employment for those who wish to do so (p. 292). This is an issue we are dealing with as a congregation currently, as we work to bring our new Youth Director, Keith Bethell, from The Bahamas to serve with us, but have yet to secure a visa for him to work in the U.S.

In a related issue, as we greet immigrants coming into the U.S. we often find they practice a different religion from Christianity. In a section entitled *Called to Be Neighbors and Witnesses in The Book of Resolutions* (p. 293), United Methodists are encouraged to be in dialogue with folks of other religious traditions. It is noted that we are challenged by both other religious movements and the rise of religious nones. Boston Avenue has been a leader in creating interfaith dialogue in Tulsa.

*The Book of Resolutions* affirms that love of neighbor and witnessing to Jesus Christ are the two primary attitudes we utilize in our dialogues. It gives special caution for us to counter unfair and negative stereotypes of Muslims and Islam. "We are to proclaim and witness to the God who has bound humanity together in care for one another, regardless of our differences" (p. 294).

"The intent in developing interreligious relationships is not to amalgamate all faiths into one religion. In dialogue, we mutually seek insight into the wisdom of other traditions and we hope to overcome our fears and misapprehensions" (p. 296). May this be our prayer.

# Faithful Explorations Series: Death Penalty

In *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, we have two statements that are related. The first addresses the death penalty and the next addresses restorative justice. As I think about these ideas, I actually find it more helpful to learn about restorative justice as the broader context, followed by considering the death penalty.

Did you ever learn about restorative justice in school or hear about it from politicians or government officials? I have only heard of these ideas from the church, until quite recently.

On restorative justice, we have this from the United Methodist Church: "To protect all persons from encroachment upon their personal and property rights, governments have established mechanisms of law enforcement and courts. A wide array of sentencing options serves to express community outrage, incapacitate dangerous offenders, deter crime, and offer opportunities for rehabilitation. We support governmental measures designed to reduce and eliminate crime that are consistent with respect for the basic freedom of persons" (p. 140).

Later in the same statement, we find: "We further support measures designed to remove the social conditions that lead to crime, and we encourage continued positive interaction between law enforcement officials and members of the community at large.

In the love of Christ, who came to save those who are lost and vulnerable, we urge the creation of a genuinely new system for the care and restoration of victims, offenders, criminal justice officials, and the community as a whole" (p. 141).

Then there is this critique of the status quo: "Most criminal justice systems around the world are retributive. These retributive justice systems profess to hold the offender accountable to the state and use punishment as the equalizing tool for accountability. In contrast, restorative justice seeks to hold the offender accountable to the victimized person, and to the disrupted community. Through God's transforming power, restorative justice seeks to repair the damage, right the wrong, and bring healing to all involved, including the victim, the offender, the families, and the community. The Church is transformed when it responds to the claims of discipleship by becoming an agent of healing and systemic change" (p. 141).

Now this following on capital punishment, I think, makes even more sense. "We believe the death penalty denies the power of Christ to redeem, restore and transform all human beings. The United Methodist Church is deeply concerned about crime throughout the world and the value of any life taken by a murder or homicide.

We believe all human life is sacred and created by God and therefore, we must see all human life as significant and valuable. When governments implement the death penalty (capital punishment), then the life of the convicted person is devalued and all possibility of change in that person's life ends. We believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and that the possibility of reconciliation with Christ comes through repentance. This gift of reconciliation is offered to all individuals without exception and gives all life new dignity and sacredness. For this reason, we

oppose the death penalty (capital punishment) and urge its elimination from all criminal codes" (p. 140).

I find these statements, like many from our United Methodist Church, both educate and challenge me to integrate my faith and life at a deeper level involving complex and difficult issues that we face as a society.

Of course, this has come closer to home for many in our Boston Avenue family because our member, Richard Glossip, is in the Oklahoma State Penitentiary on death row. He has maintained his innocence since police first contacted him about a murder that happened in Oklahoma City at a hotel where he was employed. His case for retrial or exoneration is pending before the Oklahoma Criminal Court of Appeals as the days pass moving him toward an execution date in December.

We know that innocent people have been put on death row and some put to death. A justice system that has repeatedly made that grave error cries out for change.

*Prayer: O God of creation and lover of all of your children, guide our steps into a safer world and a more just system of criminal justice. Convict us of our own sin, even as you illuminate in us the way we might more effectively protect the rights and welfare of all people. Especially we pray for Richard, as each day draws us a closer to the date set for his execution. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.*

# Faithful Explorations Series: Polarization and Getting Along

I saw this headline recently in TIME magazine, *The U.S. is Heading Toward a Second Civil War*. That is alarming. Of course, it is a headline, which is written to grab our attention. Nevertheless, the author Peter T. Coleman, shares research showing the deep polarization that has developed in America over the last fifty years.

80% of voters believing the wrong candidate being elected is “a clear and present danger to American Democracy”. Nearly half of the voters consider violence as a future political option or that states should secede from the Union to form a new country. Hence the title to the article.

Nearly 50 “drivers” of polarization are listed as contributors of this divided place in which we find ourselves. Yet, what I appreciated about the article is that the author turns to solutions and makes several suggestions. They boil down to people caring enough to talk to one another across lines of difference. The article subtitle is: *Here Is How We Avoid It*.

He says the research shows places like churches, where a wide variety of people gather for worship and fellowship in an ongoing way, show a robust effect of “reducing intergroup intolerance and violence.” That is encouraging to me. Our past series of experiences we have called “Holy Conversations” fits what he suggests is an effective way to overcome some of our polarization and enmity.

You will find five “levers for promoting change with complex problems,” in the article. Stop to Reset (we might call it reflection, meditation and prayer). Spot Positive Deviance (we might say find common ground and programs that are already contributing to this work). Complicate to Simplify (this is a warning about oversimplifying the position or belief of another as to write them off; we might say value diverse opinions). Move to Synchronize (we might say sing together or do a mission project side-by-side because moving and working together are shown to break down barriers). Adapt to Setbacks (we would say come with an attitude of openness and respect with the willingness to listen to learn).

No single conversation or meeting or action will heal the national divide or our own feelings of frustration, anger or hatred. But our faith resources guide us in the right direction in terms of love of neighbor and even direct us to love our enemies (i.e., to will the good for them).

As I have written before, we do well when we “continue to be in respectful dialogue with those with whom we disagree, to explore the sources of our differences, to honor the sacred worth of all persons, and to tell the truth about our divisions as we continue to seek the mind of Christ and to do the will of God in all things” (2012 United Methodist Book of Discipline, p. 105).