***This is a letter from Pastor Joel McMahon, writing to his congregation at the Livingston TX United Methodist Church. It was copied from the Discernment section of their website.***

Dear First Church Family,

This is a long letter, but I don’t really know how else to adequately share the information it contains. You see, during our first town hall meeting concerning our discernment process, I shared as a response to one question that I plan to move to the Global Methodist Church. I did not share my reasons for this, though. In subsequent gatherings, I have shared some of what led me to this decision, and in fairness, you deserve to know why I will make this change. This is my attempt to do so.

I. Summary:

On paper, the United Methodist Church has what I consider the best theology and governing documents of any other denomination. However, the denomination shifted through the years, and our stated beliefs and practices do not line up with what more and more pastors, bishops, churches, boards and agencies, and annual conferences actually teach and practice. Some are denying the divinity of Christ, the necessity of Christ’s death and resurrection, our need for salvation, and the authority of all scripture contained in the Old and New Testaments.  Many are intentionally violating the Book of Discipline and breaking the vows they took before God. As a whole, the United Methodist Church is becoming more and more antagonistic towards those holding to the classic Christian faith that has been handed down from generation to generation for the past two thousand years.

So, my choice to move to the Global Methodist Church comes after a great deal of prayer, study, and reflection. It is the result of my desire to remain in a denomination that adheres to our ancient faith in both word and deed, not just in what is written on paper. It is the result of my desire to be in a denomination that remains truly Methodist, where all people are welcome as sinners in need of grace at the foot of the same Savior and cross. It is the result of my desire to be in a church that looks to help people foster a deep love of Christ reflected in their private and public lives.

II. The 3 Broad Reasons Contributing to My Decision:

1. Many in UMC leadership have begun abandoning core Christian beliefs.

Many who are working diligently for the UMC to remain intact point out truthfully that it is very unlikely the UMC will alter its doctrinal standards (Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith). Yes, these are the official doctrines of the United Methodist Church, and it is virtually impossible to change them. More and more, though, very little in the UMC helps ensure those in leadership – pastors, heads of our general boards and agencies, bishops, seminary professors who train our pastors – teach what is orthodox Christian faith. In others words, in spite of some leaders who say no one is seriously considering changing our core doctrines, this has little to do with what doctrines are taught in your church’s pulpit. The official orthodoxy of the UMC is already undermined by the highly progressive spirit of most United Methodist approved seminaries and a lack of accountability to these historic doctrinal standards. With the current exodus of so many traditionalist congregations and clergy, The United Methodist Church will continue to be orthodox on paper, but that orthodoxy will be more and more ignored. Instead, the UMC will be increasingly held captive by a radical progressive theology - even in the Texas Annual Conference. This is what has happened in the UCC, the Disciples of Christ, the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church USA, and even in the Mennonite Church. And it will happen here next. Here are some examples of what I mean since 2016:

·        May 24, 2021 – UM pastor Roger Wosley writes an article denying the divinity of Christ.

·        Several schools of theology promote Unitarian Universalism (Unitarian Universalism is essentially a post-Christian religion, with historical roots in denying the divinity of Jesus Christ and believing in the universal salvation of all people, and which today is best known for its relativistic attitude of viewing all religions as equally valid.). These include: Iliff School of Theology; Boston School of Theology; Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington D.C.; The Methodist Theological School in Ohio (MTSO); St. Paul School of Theology; Perkins School of Theology (SMU); Candler School of Theology (Emory); Drew University Theological School; Claremont School of Theology.

·        Some schools of theology take it a step further and by embracing neo-paganism: Iliff School of Theology; Claremont School of Theology.

·        Some Boards of Ordained Ministry will not approve candidates for ministry who hold traditional Christian beliefs.  A District Superintendent shared how two members of the board of Ordained Ministry in the North Texas Annual Conference will not approves anyone for ordination who holds traditional 2000-year-old beliefs about substitutionary atonement.

·        In 2017, Bishop Karen Oliveto preached that we ought not to “create an Idol out of [Jesus because] like you and me, he didn’t have his life figured out…We might think of him as the Rock of Ages, but he was more like a hunk of clay, forming and reforming himself in relation to God.” She also said in that message “If Jesus can change, if he can give up his bigotries and prejudices… then so can we.” This is heresy. Jesus was not bigoted or prejudiced, he was without sin. Her theological failure here is of the first order, it’s enough to bring up charges of heresy and it is more than sufficient to remove her from the office of bishop, yet she remains in office.

·        An Associate Pastor at Friendswood UMC was a former part of the UMC in the California Pacific Conference and was seeking ordination. While in a conversation with his District Superintendent, he shared that he wanted to serve as a pastor because he wanted to lead others to saving faith in Jesus, and that he believed Jesus was the only way to salvation (John 14:6). In response, his DS shared that his belief was “far too exclusive” and went on to share that in their church they value inclusion and believe that Jesus is just one of the ways to God but not the only way. Then, the DS shared that the Associate Pastor would never be ordained in that Annual Conference.

·        At general Conference in 2016, a pastor from Iowa, when asked how he could ignore the Bible’s teachings regarding sexuality replied that the Bible wasn’t a final authority on anything.

·        July 2018 – During a panel discussion at a gathering of “centrist” pastors at Lover’s Lane UMC in Dallas, multiple United Methodist pastors and leaders affirmed: “Can we just say the Bible is wrong? Can we just agree the Bible is wrong?” This stance doesn’t align with our official UMC theology, and it wasn’t even challenged at this gathering of those who will remain in the future UMC.

·        In 2016, Adam Hamilton wrote a book titled *Making Sense of the Bible*. In that book, he shares a way to interpret the Bible that includes 3 buckets. The first bucket includes parts of the Bible that reveal God’s timeless will and heart that never changes. The second bucket is for parts of the Bible that revealed God’s will and heart for one time, but no longer do today. Finally, the third bucket is for parts of the Bible that never reflected God’s will and heart. This is his centrist, ‘high view’ of scripture, and this is not our present position on scripture as a church or a denomination nor a position of the church at any point in history. Furthermore, who decides what goes in which bucket? Is it us? Is it Adam Hamilton? What if we disagree? Not only does this approach create impossible situations of judgment, but most dangerously it puts us in a seat of judgment over God’s Word.

There are many more examples of how leaders are abandoning the faith, but at the heart of things, they are denying the work of Christ on the Cross, the divinity of Christ, the need for salvation through Christ, and the authority of Scripture – all of which are at the core of the Articles of Religion of the United Methodist Church. Even if they remain in the Book of Discipline, what difference do they make if those leading and teaching teach contrary doctrines?

2. Many in UMC leadership are acting without integrity and refusing to operate our stated covenantal vows.

The driving issue that has brought our church to the point of separation is denominational disobedience and disorder. Bishops and pastors are breaking their covenant vows and refusing to follow or enforce our rules. In truth, this is why our denomination is splitting. Some have tried to make the claim that we are splitting over our disagreements on human sexuality. While that is a component of the split, it is not the full reality. We’ve had disagreements about human sexuality since 1972. There’s been a constant attempt to change our theology for decades. There have been people of differing opinions on these issues in our denomination and local churches for decades. However, through the fair and agreed-upon processes of the church, our denomination has repeatedly settled the question of theology and chosen to maintain our theology. What needs to be understood now is our official theology or polity no longer matters. The vote to uphold our theology has become irrelevant because bishops, pastors, and our regional governing bodies (Annual and Jurisdictional Conferences) are just choosing to do whatever they want to do. The accountability structures have failed and there’s no enforcement of the rules. This is a fundamental failure in leadership and integrity. Examples since 2016 include:

·        2016 – The Oregon-Idaho Board of ordained Ministry AND clergy session voted not to enforce some of prohibitions in the *Book of Discipline*.

·        2016 – The Rocky Mountain Conference passed a resolution stating that practicing LGBTQ people should be elected as bishops in defiance of UMC clergy standards.

·        2016 – Karen Oliveto elected as bishop by the Western Jurisdiction as the first openly LGBTQA bishop in the UMC.

·        2016-present – The Mountain Sky Episcopal Area (Rocky Mountain and Yellowstone Conferences) is currently served by a bishop (Karen Oliveto) ruled ineligible by the Judicial Council.

·        March 1, 2016 – The New York Conference announced it would not use the standards in the *Book of Discipline*when vetting candidates and ordained four candidates at variance with UMC standards that same year.

·        May 2016 – The Northern Illinois Conference Board of Ordained Ministry decided it would not follow UMC ordination standards. This was later ruled out of order.

·        June 2016 – The California-Pacific Conference voted not to vet candidates for ministry according to the Book of Discipline and not to enforce UMC teachings by judicial means.

·        June 17, 2016 – The New England Conference voted “not to conform or comply with provisions of the *Discipline of the UMC*.”

·        June 18, 2016 – The Desert-Southwest Conference voted not to participate in judicial proceedings in enforcement of the UMC’s teachings on human sexuality.”

·        June 25, 2016 – The Pacific-Northwest Conference passed a “Resolution of Non-conformity with the General Conference of the United Methodist Church.

·        June 26, 2016 – The California-Nevada Conference ruled church teachings as “unfair and unjust… and should not be followed.”

·        November 15, 2016 – The Wisconsin Board of Ordained Ministry voted that is would not follow UMC ordination standards.

·        2021 – Illinois Great Rivers Conference certifies for ministry openly gay man who goes as Ms. Penny Cost as a drag queen.

·        2021 – North Central Jurisdiction vows to fight against *Book of Discipline*, stating, “We will not restrict God’s calling based solely on a candidate’s sexual orientation or gender identity. We commit to doing good by pursuing healing and reconciliation with all who have experienced harm and exclusion related to sexual orientation and gender identity.” February 29, 2020 – 12 UM clergy jointly officiated at a same-gender wedding at Duke memorial UMC in Durham, NC.

·        2021 – Rev. Craig Duke appeared in HBO’s “We’re Here” in drag.

·        June 5, 2022 – Oak Lawn UMC in Dallas officially recognized as ministers 2 openly gay pastors in an act of “Sacred Resistance.”

·        March 22, 2022 - Duke Divinity School holds worship service to ‘the great queer one’

·        September 7, 2022 – An anonymous UM Pastor writes an article in the *Pittsburgh City Paper* confessing he is bisexual and polyamorous expressing hopes of full inclusion to include polyamory.

3. Many in UMC leadership are already pushing out traditionalist/conservative pastors.

One hopeful claim is that the UMC will remain a ‘big tent’ church, inclusive of progressives, centrists, and traditionalists alike. While the theologically progressive and centrist leadership in the UMC publicly share a vision for the future church that includes traditional churches and pastors, they are not unified in this desire, and there’s a real lack of clarity on how it practically plays out. There will be some traditionalists remaining in the post-separation UMC, but they will be increasingly marginalized and with decreasing influence. Furthermore, the UMC will become increasingly hostile to those of a more traditionalist/conservative theological orientation. This is already becoming evident.

·        A pastor in our Annual Conference tells of a time he served as a missionary in Ukraine. While there, he answered to a Ukrainian District Superintendent who was, in his own right, an incredible pastor, very effective in Ukraine, and loved Jesus and the United Methodist Church. This DS decided to immigrate to California to get help for one of his kids who was severely autistic. He made the move and reached out the District Superintendent in the Sacramento area to see how he could serve in a pastoral capacity. During the interview, this DS in California asked only one question: What are your views on human sexuality? His response was that he held Methodist theology; he believed scripture taught a historic view of human sexuality. She did not engage in further conversation with him but simply said: “There’s no place for you with that view here in the United Methodist Church.” So, just to be clear, this man who had served years in the international UMC was not welcome to serve because he held our actual Methodist theology.

·        Pastor Bryan Bucher of the West Ohio Conference has been a key “centrist” leader in the UMC. In a recent discussion on his vision of the future UMC, Buchner strongly expressed a desire to block any graduate from Asbury Seminary (Asbury is the only seminary training UMC pastors that still teaches a traditional understanding of human sexuality. It is also the seminary where I did both master’s and doctoral studies.). Bucher said: “We won’t take one of them after the split if I have any say about it.” He also asked this to be enforced by the board of ordained ministry in his annual conference (the main body charged with screening ordination candidates in each area). Bucher represents a significant ‘centrist’ voice that has been leading in the UMC and will lead after separation. The West Ohio Annual Conference has already been operating in that way. A seminary friend of mine who came to our Annual Conference from there was in process of becoming an ordained pastor in that conference, but his District Superintendent was already working to prevent Asbury grads from getting ordained by “losing” or “not receiving” their paperwork. My friend sent his paperwork via certified mail. At the his district level interview, he was told by the DS that the necessary paperwork hadn’t been sent in, to which my friend replied, “Well, here’s the signed certified mail receipt with your signature.” The paperwork magically appeared a few minutes later.

·        When in 2019 the General Conference held its special session to finalize the human sexuality debate once and for all, centrist leader Tom Berlin said that the Traditional Plan (the plan that maintained our church’s current theology) would be like: “Putting a virus into the American church that will make it very sick.” For the delegates that disagreed, he asked those delegates to abstain from voting. He made the analogy of how many African nations had stopped Ebola by washing their hands and asked delegates to wash their hands and rid the church of this virus called the Traditional Plan. Berlin’s perspective here is striking for a couple of reasons. First, the Traditional Plan was the plan to uphold our current theology in the church. If he thought it was a virus, why did he ever take vows to uphold it in the first place? Second, it gives us a view of how he as a centrist sees the historic/traditional understanding of human sexuality upheld by the church for 2000 years. Finally, what’s SO important to realize is that in the spectrum of leadership that will remain in the UMC, Berlin is more theologically center; he’s not on the far theological left. He’s going to be more orthodox in his beliefs and he is going to at least express more of a desire to let there be a middle ground where there are differences. But, this doesn’t sound like much of a middle ground to me. Tom berlin was nominated this year for Bishop by the Virginia Annual Conference and will very likely be one of our new UMC bishops. If this is one of our new bishops, and here are his ‘centrist’ views, again, it’s hard to imagine that he truly wants to respect and make space for traditionalists. If our church’s theology is an illness we need to rid ourselves of, how could he fairly treat pastors and churches who actually hold those beliefs? It's hard to imagine that he would be able to treat those pastors and churches fairly.

III. A Brief Comment Regarding Sexuality:

Some say the split in the United Methodist Church is the result of the single issue of homosexuality, that the Global Methodist Church will be “gay hating and exclusionary.”  The issue of homosexuality is an important matter in this debate, I will not deny it, but the idea that the Global Methodist Church is hating and excluding LGBTQ people is false. All people will be welcome to participate in the life and ministries of the church. The transitional book of discipline of the GMC does not mention homosexuality at all. What it does say regarding sexuality is: “We believe that human sexuality is a gift of God that is to be affirmed as it is exercised within the legal and spiritual covenant of a loving and monogamous marriage between one man and one woman (Exodus 20:14, Matthew 19:3-9, Ephesians 5:22-33),” and, “We are saddened by all expressions of sexual behavior, including pornography, polygamy, and promiscuity, that do not recognize the sacred worth of each individual or that seek to exploit, abuse, objectify, or degrade others, or that represent less than God’s intentional design for His children. While affirming a scriptural view of sexuality and gender, we welcome all to experience the redemptive grace of Jesus and are committed to being a safe place of refuge, hospitality, and healing for any who may have experienced brokenness in their sexual lives (Genesis 1:27, Genesis 2:24, 1 Corinthians 6:9-20).”

IV. Conclusion:

So, there you have it. It’s a lot, but to really explain my decision, you need a broader vision of what led me to this point. It is easy to take any few of these instances and say, “Oh, those are just a few isolated things,” but they really are not. They each represent a small piece to a larger picture of what is happening within the United Methodist Church, and there are many more pieces. Ultimately, the United Methodist Church is becoming and will continue to become increasingly progressive/liberal. Traditionalists in the post-separation UMC will likely experience pressure to behave counter to their convictions. I made my decision based on those realities.

It is not an easy decision for me. I have been part of the United Methodist denomination for the entirety of my life, and I will lose friends over this. These include friends in churches I have served, other pastor’s kids with whom I played as a child, men and women I have known for most of my life, people who helped raise me, friends I have had since entering ministry, and friends I have worked with and mentored for years. These are people I love. So, as I share with you, realize this is not something I gleefully wave about like a flag of conquest. Each thing I lay out for you is one that pierces my heart with grief, for in leaving the United Methodist Church, I am leaving my home.

Blessings to you all,

Joel