

Out of Exodus: A Journey of Open and Affirming Ministry

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The United Methodist Church has focused considerable effort of late on destroying itself over the status of LGBTQIA+ people in ecclesial life. That dispute, of course, extends far deeper into questions of religious authority, biblical interpretation, and Christian unity. *Out of Exodus* is a thoughtful, clearly written set of reflections from one local congregation, Grandview United Methodist Church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, on the process of becoming a Reconciling congregation and the effects of that decision. The book is worth reading for that reason alone. Additionally, however, Stephens and his co-authors provide a deceptively simple method for ethical reflection, the power of which goes beyond the issues raised in United Methodism's present rift.

The book is organized in five "Acts," each containing multiple chapters, using the biblical story of Exodus as a framework. Each chapter begins with a short sermon on a biblical text, most often from the Exodus story. Those sermons are then followed by personal reflections from Methodist lay people on some aspect of the text, the process of becoming reconciling within Grandview UMC, or on personal experiences of coming to terms with one's identity. Stephens offers theological reflections on the movements of the book, as well as providing sermons for several of the chapters. Although the outlines of each chapter vary, the book's basic procedure is to combine biblical, homiletical, theological, and personal reflections to provide a more robust and nuanced account than would be possible from any one of those perspectives.

This book has multiple strengths, but perhaps its most salient virtue is that it embodies the ethos of the reconciling congregation whose work it describes, while taking very practical account of the intersectional nature of identity. As Stephens makes clear in a sermon from the tenth chapter, the process of becoming a reconciling congregation has opened Grandview UMC to a range of theological and moral exploration that would not have been possible otherwise. Grandview has found that exploring the boundaries and limits of life together in church creates an atmosphere in which questioning is welcome, grace is revealed, and the bounds of hospitality and community are expanded far beyond the full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in the life of the church.

By bringing in multiple lay voices, *Out of Exodus* locates ethical reflection beyond the academy in ecclesial and personal life. Because of the diversity of those voices, and the subject matter itself, the book could be useful in multiple

settings. It could be included in introductory Christian ethics courses at an undergraduate or graduate level, particularly as a window into questions of ethical method. The clear writing and practical thinking on church life it contains make it a worthwhile read in churches, especially those exploring the possibility of becoming open and affirming or reconciling. Preachers will benefit from the sermons and the theology that accompanies them. Finally, the book is worth reading by anyone who is disheartened by United Methodism's turmoil. As Stephens reminds us, "As a Christian community, we get stronger as we address additional challenges, gaining not only tools but also a new and renewed sense of identity in relation to God" (150).

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