**Called to Ministry: The journey of LGBTQ+ students.**

**Abstract**

When LGBTQIA+ individuals feel a strong call to ministry many are encouraged by their churches to move forward, often because they remain closeted. Many have not been open with their sexual orientation because they do not feel safe in their religious communities. A few have been encouraged by those who know their truth. When they begin degrees in Religion, they do so with the hope that there will be a place for them in ministry. They may understand the prohibitions their faith communities observe, but God’s call is stronger than human prohibition.

I will use case studies of former students who identify within the LGBTQ+ community to explore how they navigated their call within the restrictive guidelines of the United Methodist Church. It takes perseverance to follow God’s call, being in a marginalized community adds layers of complication to the journey.

**Called to Ministry: The journey of LGBTQ+ students.**

**By Leslie A. Long**

How did we get here? The Church has divided over many things throughout its long history, over leadership, polity, theological and doctrinal understandings. It should not surprise anyone that the church is once again at a place of division. Some denominations are still fighting over whether women can lead as fully ordained ministers within the church. Other denominations are divided over the role and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals. Can they be ordained as ministers? Can they be married within the church? Can a minister perform a wedding ceremony for a person from this community? Determinations are being made in the name of God based on interpretation of scripture. The decisions being made are controversial and harmful to many. The victims of religious fighting are real people. Our churches are seen as less relevant than ever to new generations as most places of worship are not growing and some are even closing their doors. Church membership is now below 50% in the United States. The need for church affiliation has dropped especially among Millennials born between 1981-1996 to 36%. [[1]](#endnote-1)

The Church has always had to deal with the tension between biblical teaching, diverse interpretation, and current culture. The present-day vitriol over the issue of homosexuality among some religious groups may push more individuals from the church. Are exclusionary practices in line with biblical teachings? Depending on how you interpret the biblical text alters how you might answer that question.

**Scriptural Interpretation**

Our views of the Bible and what it teaches are nearly as diverse as the people who read it. What we believe can be affected by many things, the place you grew up, the beliefs of your family unit, if you attended church or did not go. Unfortunately, few believers do in-depth studies of the Bible but instead rely on clergy and others to tell them what it says and how they should believe it. With the rise of social media access, there are more ways than ever to learn about the Bible and what it supposedly teaches. The rise of misinformation and kooky theology abound. With fewer people at church, and more reliance on technology to teach them, it is no wonder we are so diverse in our thoughts over the Bible. Yet, even when people enter the Bible thoughtfully and with care, we can have wildly diverse interpretations and take aways of what a Christian life looks like.

As scholars we must dig into the words used in the Bible and realize some translations are more accurate than others yet are still up to interpretation. Even those who claim inerrancy within the Bible, if honest, still pick and choose what they will follow. There are a handful of text that allude to what many see as sinful homosexual relationships. Some of the text often identified as clearly prohibiting homosexual actions are Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; I Corinthians 6:9–10; and 1Timothy 1:10. Reading commentaries can give some insight to the meaning of these text. But even commentary writers have diverse understandings. In research done by Ed Oxford, a Bible scholar, he looked back at older Bible translations from a variety of countries. He discovered that what we currently read as a “man shall not lie with man as with a woman” was translated and printed in older text as a “man shall not lie with young boys as he does with a woman, for it is an abomination.” Similar interpretations were found in a 1674 Swedish translation and an 1830 Norwegian Bible. We do not find the word homosexual in the Bible until the Revised Standard editors put it in place in 1946 for the Greek words "malakoi" and "arsenokoitai."[[2]](#endnote-2) When we read the New Testament, we find the only references to homosexuality coming from Paul. He would have assumed all people were heterosexual since God made male and female. Paul probably understood homosexual acts as “pagan depravity.” Jesus never addresses this subject.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The Bible has been a key text for condemning homosexuality. Its influence continues to guide the beliefs and understandings of those who hold it as sacred. The Bible is central to all who call themselves Christian. In the United States of America religious beliefs and values continue to guide human thought. This paper will not attempt to come to a “right conclusion” concerning homosexuality and the Bible. It will look at how our beliefs can affect others.

**The Current Climate in the United Methodist Church**

With the current climate surrounding beliefs about the LGBTQ+ community it is no surprise that denominations have divided. Churches and denominations have been at odds over their beliefs of what is right and wrong when it comes to homosexuality. Some denominations have taken a strong stance either in support or prohibition of individuals who are part of these communities. Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Presbyterians have seen division and loss of membership over this issue. Some religious groups have accepted full equality of the LGBTQ+ community without as much controversy, including the Society of Friends (Quakers), the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian-Universalist Association. Some denominations have left it up to the local church to decide their stance at each location including the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the National Baptist Convention.[[4]](#endnote-4) My own denomination, the United Methodist Church, is experiencing many churches disaffiliating over this issue. Some are leaving because the denomination has not changed the language and is still discriminating against the LGBTQ+ community. Although the language and official stance of the UMC has not changed some feel that the church has been too lax in upholding the rules found in the Book of Discipline and have decided to leave. In the South-Central Jurisdiction (Arkansas, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas) and Southeastern Jurisdiction (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia) there are some cities and towns that are now without a United Methodist Church because of disaffiliation Approximately 1/5th of the denomination has voted to exit. New United Methodist churches are being started in some of these areas by those who wish to remain UMC. Many of these new church starts have a heart for inclusion of all people no matter their sexual orientation.

**How We Got Here**

Following the Stonewall uprising that took place in New York City in the summer of 1969 the issue of discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community began to be noticed in ways it had not been before. As a response to continuing acts of violence against those in this community, language was proposed at the 1972 United Methodist General Conference that validated that homosexuals were people of sacred worth, whose rights should be protected as they were welcomed into the church. The language was added but not before an amendment was placed upon it. After a contentious debate the following was tacked on to the proposed statement: “though we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”[[5]](#endnote-5) With the added amendment the statement was passed.

Following the 1972 General Conference we see more language added to The Book of Discipline in subsequent years. The language continues to get more restrictive with each swipe of the pen for those in the LGBTQ+ community. In 1976 a new statement was added banning same-sex marriage. In 1984, language is added “that no self-avowed homosexual could be ordained” and in 1988 United Methodist ministers were banned from doing same-sex marriages and a wedding could not be performed in any United Methodist churches.[[6]](#endnote-6)

While the restrictions grow inside the United Methodist denomination, we see an ease of the same laws in the United States and changing attitudes. In 2004 the first state, Massachusetts allows for same-sex marriage and by 2015 it becomes legal in all 50 states when the U.S. Supreme Court strikes down a ban in some states.[[7]](#endnote-7) A Pew Research study shows that acceptance of homosexuality from 2002 to 2019 in the United States has risen from 51% to 72%. In many countries we are seeing double-digit moves in how people think and feel about the LGBTQ+ community. Studies reveal that women are also more accepting of homosexuality than men. Young people are more accepting than older individuals. Another issue we must consider is that more and more people are saying that religion is less important in their lives, in the U.S., this has risen from 57% to 86% in the Pew Study. [[8]](#endnote-8) In a study done comparing survey results from 2001 to 2022 the rate for gay and lesbian relationships being morally acceptable rose from 40% to 71% while those believing then to be morally wrong fell from 53% to 25%.[[9]](#endnote-9)

As the attitudes were changing in the United States around acceptance and inclusion it was becoming apparent with each new General Conference that the divide between members of the United Methodist Church was growing as it related to human sexuality. With more punitive restrictions in The Book of Discipline and the changing attitudes of those in the larger society tension was rising on what the stance of the church should be.

**The Stance of the United Methodist Church**

Because of the divide in the church growing larger those gathering at the 2016 General Conference asked for help and guidance from the Council of Bishops concerning the items in the Book of Discipline that were related to issues of human sexuality. From this request came the Commission on the Way Forward.[[10]](#endnote-10) It was the hope of the commission that by bringing together individuals from diverse perspectives they could create a plan to move the United Methodist Church forward and away from the divide that was brewing.

When General Conference gathered in St. Louis, Missouri on February 23-26, 2019, work had been done in the report by the Commission on a Way Forward. The commission hoped they could find a way to hold the United Methodist Church together “amid the present impasse related to LGBTQ+ inclusion.” The commission had examined the paragraphs in the 2016 Book of Discipline that included language concerning human sexuality (see appendix for more details).

“The Commission advocated for a One Church Plan, which would loosen restrictions and allow Board of Ordained Ministry to use their own discretion in who they ordain and allow clergy and churches to make their own decisions regarding same-sex marriage, without compelling anyone to act contrary to his or her position.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

Although there aims were honorable, the church, like the United States was at a point of great division. The 2019 General Conference voted 438 to 384 to uphold the Traditional Plan which supported the current language in the Book of Discipline. From that point on the United Methodist church has been struggling with disaffiliations. The interesting part of this journey is that although the exclusive language remained in the Book of Discipline most of the churches that have left support the traditional restrictive language that was voted on in 2019. Nothing has changed in the language, but they have chosen to disaffiliate anyway.

**General Conference 2019**

During the Spring of 2019, the United Methodist Studies course was being taught in the School of Religion. The professor teaching the class took around 12 students to the conference. I went as a second adult on the trip. Our students were not of one mind about how the vote should go. We had 3 or 4 students who supported the language in the Book of Discipline as it was written. The rest of the students desired a change. Among those who desired to see change, a few counted themselves among the LGBTQ+ community.

When the vote was taken students were in tears. Many, felt like the church that had nurtured their faith, encouraged their call, was now turning them out. There was anger and many tears still to come. The vote also created a rift among the students who were on both sides of the issue. We went back to the hotel and discussed the evening, we prayed and tried to create a safe place for conversation. The events of the day had negatively impacted our community.

When we returned to the University we once again met to debrief and try to listen to one another and hear the concerns of the students. It was a stressful gathering with tears shed and hurts shared. The gathering helped us as we navigated the rest of the semester but those students who had once been friends now were divided. A line had been drawn. Trust had been lost. For students from the LGBTQ+ community, those they had called friends now felt like betrayers. The interesting thing about the gathering of students was that those who believed the language should stay prohibitive, when asked if they felt students in the LGBTQ+ community had a calling from God to do ministry – responded positively that they saw God calling them. I have interviewed two of the students who attended General Conference in 2019 and are currently in seminary. Both have worked in ministry and are contemplating their place to serve moving forward.

**Case Studies Process**

I asked three young adults who had completed a degree in Religion to share their experience by answering a set of questions. Each has a call to ministry and are part of the LGBTQ+ community. Two of three finished the questions. The other is stepping back from ministry for the moment. The two who finished the questionnaire have gone on to work on Master of Divinity degrees at two different universities. Included below are summaries and excepts from their interview questions.

*When did you receive your call to ministry?*

Both the individuals I interviewed felt a call to ministry at a special setting. One felt their call at church camp and the other at United Methodist Annual Conference. They shared how they were nudged by the Holy Spirit. Neither was prepared to be called. Both individuals were encouraged by pastoral leadership in the church they attended to follow their call. One received their call to ministry in middle school and the other one was in high school at the time. One grew up in the church from a young age, the other came to Christianity in their teen years.

*Did you realize/or had you come out when you received your call?*

One of the individuals did not know they were a lesbian when they received their call to ministry. The other person remembers feeling different than the other cis boys around him. Although he did not have the language to explain his feelings or “to verbalize his queerness, it had always been there.”

Because he felt his call to ministry in middle school, the time when young people are learning about themselves, he stated: “My sexuality and my call to ministry collided in a way that felt catastrophic. I remember crying myself to sleep every night, asking God to ‘fix me.’” He continued to pursue his call but “felt resentment toward God.” He wondered why God would give him the “burden” of his sexuality while calling him into ministry. He felt strongly that he would have to choose between his faith and sexuality. He had even “vowed to pursue a heterosexual marriage and never tell anyone about his sexuality.” As he got older these ideas changed.

*Who was the first person you came out to? Why did you choose the person?*

Coming out can be a complicated process. It is often done in steps over time. Both young people came out to their friends first. They received positive support upon sharing the news. One was in high school and” the other was a junior in college when they shared their truth. One of the individuals shared she “first came out as bisexual” she felt it was safer, “I was dipping my toes into the community and seeing how people would react.” Her friends were not surprised by her announcements and “continued on like nothing had changed. I felt so at peace.”

*Who was the first person in ministry/connected to the UMC you shared your journey with? (if different than above)*

Both young people said they shared with someone who they knew to be safe and affirming. One shared with her boss she worked with in a United Methodist setting. The other individual shared his truth with me at church camp. He also talked to other clergy at the camp. He felt enough support in his conversations to eventually share his truth in a closing devotion to the entire camp. Every clergy member “pledged to walk with me in my call to ministry.” Other campers told him “how life changing that moment was” for them as well.

*If you had to do it again, would you change anything about coming out?*

The individual who shared his truth at camp said he would not change a thing in how it happened –because he stated that it felt Divinely Ordained to share the news.

While he would not change a thing the other young adult would do things differently. One issue she discussed was that she posted information on social media. What she “posted has been used by conservative Christians in ways that are not ideal for any LGBTQ+ person.” When she made her post, the United Methodist Church was in the fervor of General Conference 2019. She would have been more private in her revelation and selective about who was included in learning her truth. One of her former pastors has also used her post as a reason for their church to disaffiliate. She has experienced some hate from people who were once important to her and supported her call.

*What obstacles have you experienced as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community as it relates to your call? Please share as many as you can.*

Both individuals have faced many obstacles after coming out. Since the United Methodist Book of Discipline has a statement in paragraph 304 that reads, “The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.”

One of the individuals interviewed has been informed that taking a vow of celibacy is needed. As she reflected, she said, “It can be isolating to commit to a life in ministry and, in turn, commit to a life without being able to spend it with someone I love.”

Both young adults have experienced hate, painful statements, and actions from those who once shared communion inside the church with them. Both have lost support from people who once encouraged their call, thinking them straight. Many of the people who supported them, once they found out they were part of the LGBTQ+ community, no longer encouraged them to enter ministry and invalidated their call.

One of the candidates for ministry had a staff member say, “they thought the individual was gay and wanted to punch them in the face.” They also found their anxiety and depression remained at an all-time high while serving in congregations that were not reconciling[[12]](#footnote-1). When they worked in church settings that were not reconciling, they often felt like they had to “enter back into the closet.”

*Where have you felt lifted or celebrated as you pursue your call? Explain.*

Both young adults have found churches where they feel included and valued for who they are as members of the LGBTQ+ community. They also felt the support of the academy while they worked on their degrees. One of the individuals felt that the academy may have “instilled a naïve hope . . . that one day things could change.” Although the individual remains hopeful, they did not feel fully prepared for the “institutional resistance they encountered.”

*Where do you see your ministry work in the future (ordained elder, deacon, or other)?*

While one individual sees themselves pursuing the Deacon ministry track, stating they are “still following God on exactly what that means.” The other is more unclear about their ministry future. Although they are still interested in ordination, they are not sure that traditional parish ministry is a fit. They stated, “I feel that the kind of change I hope to create must happen on an individual level, until the institution is ready to make changes. I do not think that will happen in my lifetime, but I am committed to continuing to lay the groundwork.”

*Do you see your ministry in the UMC or outside the UMC?*

One of the people I interviewed see themselves pursing ministry in the United Methodist Church. Even though they have faced hatred from some in the church they also recognize this is the denomination that led them to a life with Christ. They value the emphasis on grace and the passion for change and social justice. The other young adult feels the number of wounds they have experienced as they “have shown up, proven their worth and loyalty to the UMC, was not appreciated.” They feel the denomination is too rigid and static. Although they still say they love the UMC they no longer “think it is wise to invest anymore of their effort in the denomination.” They went on to say that they would like to create spiritual spaces outside the church. “The folks I am in community with desire for spiritual connection but have significant trauma related to Church. I hope to fill the gap.” Many but not all in this group are part of the LGBTQ+ community.

*How do you believe the current language in the Book of Discipline will impact your ministry or how has it impacted your ministry to this point?*

Both the respondents know that the language in the Discipline has a detrimental effect on their work in ministry as a person from the LGBTQ+ community. The wording will impact the course of their ministry. They will have to decide if they will continue or leave the United Methodist Church in the future. There is a chance that the language might change in the Book of Discipline but there is no guarantee. Many feel we are on-track to remove the restrictive language against the LGBTQ+ community. This can only be done at General Conference. The next one will be in April 2024. Only time will tell. Neither young adult is struggling with whether God has called them into ministry. They are questioning where and how it will be done in the future. One young adult shared:

“Being deemed “incompatible with Christian teaching” brings a heavy toll with each step I take into furthering my certification for candidacy. I have been told I am in defiance of the Book of Discipline, incompatible to teach and to preach. But I do not feel incompatible to God. I do not feel like I am defying what God has called me to do.

The other respondent shared:

“I used to have goals of overcoming the restrictive language in the Book of Disciple. I dreamed of a day that despite the rules and restrictions, my conference would come to recognize my gifts and graces and affirm my call through ordination. Now that I have cultivated more self-worth, I do not want to associate my life’s work with a denomination that doesn’t recognize my full humanity. A pastor is supposed to walk with their congregation members in every season of life. The current language in the Book of Disciple sets my ministry up for failure.”

**Conclusion**

This case study is limited in its scope. I could have spent many hours exegeting scripture and trying to give accurate interpretation. Knowing scripture and being able to point out verses from the Bible does not always answer hard questions. Each faith community will be tasked with deciding how they understand what the Bible says to them in the current age. But it is also important to hear from individuals who are affected by the language and stances we take in our religious communities. We often take positions or hold our ground without considering the bigger picture. I have worked with both young adults as a professor and mentor. I see God’s call upon their lives in the same way I see it with my other students who are not part of the LGBTQ+ community. I have no doubt that God has called each into ministry. Throughout the Bible we see a variety of people called by God to share the faith. Denominations and other communities of faith have set rules and regulations that they believe are true to the interpretation of the Bible and God’s desires. As Christians we will all need to decide how the Holy Spirit is guiding us. Considering what both young adults in this study have faced during their journeys I commend them for still wishing to serve God as they move forward. The church has invested in both young people through church camp, youth groups, weekly worship, and college scholarships. Many pastors have recognized God’s call for ministry on their lives. Before they came out as part of the LGBTQ+ community they had unlimited support. What made their call different once they came out? They are the same individuals whose call had been recognized. Some may wish to argue they need to give up their “gayness” to better serve God. For those who believe members of the LGBTQ+ community choose this lifestyle they may see this as a viable choice. As we heard from one of the participants, he would have tried to change if it had been a possible option – it was not.

In the Book of Discipline, in Article 4 it also states, “The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth.” If we believe all people are of sacred worth, why do we then believe God cannot call them into ministry? If we raise them up in our churches to acknowledge God’s call on their life – do, we have the right to tell them they are not worthy? The United Methodist Church is just another protestant church facing this question. No matter your stance, this is an important issue that is affecting the lives of many. Our actions are speaking to the LGBTQ+ community and all those who love and care for someone who identifies as such. How we move forward needs to be carefully considered.

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2. Ed Oxford. Has “Homosexual” Always Been in the Bible? [https://um-insight.net/perspectives/has-“homosexual”-always-been-in-the-bible/](https://um-insight.net/perspectives/has-%E2%80%9Chomosexual%E2%80%9D-always-been-in-the-bible/) (October 14, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. William Loader. Homosexuality in the New Testament. <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/passages/related-articles/homosexuality-in-the-new-testament/> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
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7. Koneig, The Back Story. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. [Jacob Poushter](https://www.pewresearch.org/staff/jacob-poushter) and [Nicholas Kent](https://www.pewresearch.org/staff/nicholas-kent). The Global Divide on Homosexuality Persists. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/06/25/global-divide-on-homosexuality-persists/> (June 25, 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Are Gay or Lesbian Relationships Morally Acceptable? <https://www.statista.com/statistics/226147/americans-moral-views-on-gay-or-lesbian-relations-in-the-united-states/> (November 2022). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Commission on the Way Forward. <https://www.unitedmethodistbishops.org/newsdetail/commission-on-a-way-forward-12793363> (3/23/18). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Koneig, The Back Story.

**Appendix**

**The Language in the Book of Discipline**

The Book of Discipline is clear with its language and prohibitions against homosexuality. The Book of Discipline is the official book of polity for those who call themselves United Methodist. Since that time many in the denomination have been working to change the language or to remove it all together. The Book of Discipline can only be changed through a vote at the official gathering body of the General Conference. Delegates to General Conference include an equal number of lay and clergy members from across the USA and beyond. Tensions had been rising between those who believe the wording should remain and delegates who are ready for it to me removed.

2016 Book of Discipline Statements

**Regarding church membership**

	* **¶ 4. Article IV. Inclusiveness of the Church:**The United Methodist Church acknowledges that all persons are of sacred worth. All persons without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition, shall be eligible to attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, upon baptism be admitted as baptized members, and upon taking vows declaring the Christian faith, become professing members in any local church in the connection.
	* **¶ 214. Eligibility:**All people may attend its worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, and become members in any local church in the connection (¶ 4).**Regarding the ministry of the ordained**

	* **¶ 304.3:**The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.
	* **¶ 341.6:**Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches.
	* **¶ 2702:**(Chargeable Offenses) A bishop, clergy member of an annual conference (¶ 370), local pastor, clergy on honorable or administrative location, or diaconal minister may be tried when charged (subject to the statute of limitations in (¶ 2702.4) with one or more of the following offenses: (a) immorality including but not limited to, not being celibate in singleness or not faithful in a heterosexual marriage; (b) practices declared by The United Methodist Church to be incompatible with Christian teachings, including but not limited to: being a self-avowed practicing homosexual; or conducting ceremonies which celebrate homosexual unions; or performing same-sex wedding ceremonies; (c) crime; (d) disobedience to the order and discipline of The United Methodist Church; (e) dissemination of doctrines contrary to the established standards of doctrine of The United Methodist Church; (f) relationships and/or behavior that undermines the ministry of another pastor; (g) child abuse; (h) sexual abuse;16 i) sexual misconduct including the use or possession of pornography, (j) harassment, including, but not limited to racial and/or sexual harassment; (k) racial or gender discrimination; or (l) fiscal malfeasance.**Regarding United Methodist funds**

	* **¶ 613:**The [conference council on finance and administration] shall have authority and responsibility to .... ensure that no annual conference board, agency, committee, commission, or council shall give United Methodist funds to any gay caucus or group, or otherwise use such funds to promote the acceptance of homosexuality or violate the expressed commitment of The UMC "not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends" (¶ 161F).
	* **¶ 806.9:**[The General Council on Finance and Administration] shall be responsible for ensuring that no board, agency, committee, commission, or council shall give United Methodist funds to any gay caucus or group, or otherwise use such funds to promote the acceptance of homosexuality or violate the expressed commitment of The United Methodist Church 'not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends' (¶ 161F).(From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* — 2016. Copyright 2016 by The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.)  [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Reconciling churches are part of a group of congregations that publicly support the LGBTQ+ community. They welcome those from the LGBTQ+ community to be full participants in the church at all levels. The Reconciling Ministries Network began as a response to the exclusionary language in the UM Book of Discipline. <https://rmnetwork.org> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)