



# Finding a Way Forward

Resources for Witness,  
Contextual Leadership  
and Unity

A Handbook for United Methodist Church Bishops  
on the work of the  
Commission on a Way Forward

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### **About the Commission on a Way Forward**

The 32-member Commission on a Way Forward was appointed by the Council of Bishops to assist the bishops in their charge from the 2016 General Conference to lead the church forward amid the present impasse related to LGBTQ and resulting questions about the unity of the church.

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## Greeting from Bishop Bruce Ough

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ, risen and among us through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

I want to thank the Commission moderators, Bishops Ken Carter, Sandra Steiner Ball and David Yemba, for the invitation to greet you on behalf of the Council of Bishops.

I also want to thank the moderators for their exemplary servant leadership, and Gil Rendle, Alex Shanks and Maidstone Mulenga who have been resourcing and supporting them and the Commission.

But, I reserve my greatest admiration and gratitude for members of the Commission on a Way Forward. As president, I can hardly express how grateful the Council of Bishops is to each member of the Commission for this service to the Council and the entire church. I know many, if not all of them, serve at great personal sacrifice. I know something of having multiple areas of work.

This work is essential to advancing the work of the Commission and preparing this Council to lead the Special Session of the General Conference that we have called for February 2019.

But, we dare not live in a Commission cocoon. The mission of God is larger than our division, debate and discernment regarding homosexuality. And, our United Methodist work and witness as a part of the *missio dei* remains vibrant and fruitful.

So, as you consider some sketches of models, I encourage you to not settle for easy answers or try to fix the church, but have the courage to explore those vehicles that can help hold us together through not only this current conflict, but the conflict that will surely follow this one. In other words, help us discern adaptable structures, vehicles, canoes that are intended and designed to be continuously adaptive.

I believe, as perhaps many in the Commission do, that a way forward that (1) maintains unity, (2) honors our distinctive Wesleyan connectional values and (3) has the property of being continuously adaptive, must have a rock-solid, Christ-centered core of theological principles, formational practices and missional imperatives. If the core is not solid and affirmed, then we will continue the failed pattern of trying to maintain unity through non-adaptive, rigid structures and rules that do not have the power or Holy imagination needed to canoe the mountains.

There is currently no larger or intractable barrier to the mission, unity and vitality of The United Methodist Church than the matter of homosexuality. The specific issues of same-gender marriage, the ordination of LBGTQ persons, and the underlying issues of scriptural authority and biblical obedience are our denomination's Rocky Mountains, and it is clear there is no way forward unless we are willing to re-think and re-design what a global United Methodist Church looks like. We are clearly in uncharted territory.

So, as we seek to canoe the mountains together, I urge you to maintain our core conviction that Jesus is Lord; maintain our core mission to make disciples of Jesus for the transformation of the world; and maintain our core evangelical passion to tell everyone this Good News.

## A Greeting from the Moderators

Dear Colleague Bishops,

Grace to you and peace, in the name of the One who is able to do far more than we can ask or imagine, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord.

We write to thank you for the honor of serving as moderators of the Commission on a Way Forward. In the summer and fall we began to compose the membership of the commission, in consultation with the Council. We then began to plan for our meetings with the guidance of Gil Rendle. Our early agenda was in the development of relationships and trust among commission members, adopting a covenant and establishing a commitment to the mission, vision and scope of the work. Over the past few meetings we have worked on models that might help us in finding a way forward.

The Commission on a Way Forward sees itself in service to the Council of Bishops. You are the Commission's client. We hope the relationship matures to one of conversation partner and collaboration. A healthy relationship between commission and council gives us the greatest potential to serve the called General Conference in 2019.

The Commission will offer an interim report of its work to you in this Council meeting. The report will be presented by the bishops who serve on the commission. They come from five U.S. jurisdictions, Africa, Europe and the Philippines. The bishops also serve among a diverse group of laity and clergy, who have a deep desire to serve alongside you in this task. You can help us by giving us clear guidance in the remaining work of the commission.

We are grateful for your prayers and friendship. My God bless you as you lead in this pivotal moment in our history.

Bishop Ken Carter  
Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball  
Bishop David Yemba

## Bishops' Report at 2016 General Conference

Galatians 3:25-29 (NRSV)

*But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.*



Your bishops were honored to receive the request of General Conference to help lead our United Methodist Church forward during this time of both great crisis and great opportunity. As far as we can discover, this is the first time that a General Conference has ever made such a request of the Council of Bishops, and we accept this request with humility.

We share with you a deep commitment to the unity of the church in Christ our Lord. Yesterday, our president shared the deep pain we feel. We have all prayed for months and continue to do so. We seek, in this kairos moment, a way forward for profound unity on human sexuality and other matters. This deep unity allows for a variety of expressions to co-exist in one church. Within the Church, we are called to work and pray for more Christ-like unity with each other rather than separation from one another. This is the prayer of Jesus in John 17:21-23.

**UNITY** We believe that our unity is found in Jesus Christ; it is not something we achieve but something we receive as a gift from God. We understand that part of our role as bishops is to lead the church toward new behaviors, a new way of being and new forms and structures which allow a unity of our mission of "making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world" while allowing for

differing expressions as a global church. Developing such new forms will require a concerted effort by all of us, and we your bishops commit ourselves to lead this effort. We ask you, as a General Conference, to affirm your own commitment to maintaining and strengthening the unity of the church. We will coordinate this work with the various efforts already underway to develop global structures and a new *General Book of Discipline* for our church. Strengthening the unity of the church is a responsibility for all of us.

**PRAYER** We accept our role as spiritual leaders to lead the UMC in a "pause for prayer" - to step back from attempts at legislative solutions and to intentionally seek God's will for the future. As a Council of Bishops, we will lead the church in every part of the world in times of worship, study, discernment, confession and prayer for God's guidance. We ask you, as a General Conference, to join us in this effort, beginning this week. We were moved by the sight of delegates praying around the table, and we hope these efforts will continue. As your bishops, we are ready to join you and to lead you in these times of prayer.

**PROCESSES** We have discussed in depth the processes which might help our church heal and move forward - up to and including the possibility of a called General Conference in 2018 or 2019. We have not finalized our plans for such processes, but we will keep working on options we have heard from many of you, and we will keep reporting to this General Conference and to the whole church.

**NEXT STEPS** We recommend that the General Conference defer all votes on human sexuality and refer this entire subject to a special Commission, named by the Council of Bishops, to develop a complete examination and possible revision of every paragraph in our *Book of Discipline* regarding human sexuality. We continue to hear from many people on the debate over sexuality that our current *Discipline* contains language which is contradictory, unnecessarily hurtful, and inadequate for the variety of local, regional and global contexts. We will name such a Commission to include persons from every region of our UMC, and will include representation from differing perspectives on the debate. We commit to maintain an on-going dialogue with this Commission as they do their work, including clear objectives and outcomes. Should they complete their work in time for a called General Conference, then we will call a two- to three-day gathering before the 2020 General Conference. (We will consult with GCFA regarding cost-effective ways to hold that gathering.)

**CONTINUING DISCUSSIONS** We will continue to explore options to help the church live in grace with one another - including ways to avoid further complaints, trials and harm while we uphold the *Discipline*. We will continue our conversation on this matter and report our progress to you and to the whole church.

Today, as a way of beginning to find our way forward, we suggest that in place of the allotted legislative time we spend 1-2 hours of plenary time in prayer, confession and exploration of a creative way forward. The bishops are prepared to provide questions to guide your conversations. Your conversations will be the first step to a way forward.



## Timeline to 2019 Special General Conference

- **May 18, 2016:** Delegates at the 2016 General Conference in Portland, Oregon, USA, approve request from Council of Bishops to delay a debate on homosexuality until a proposed commission can study church regulations. Instead, the bishops asked for the body’s permission to name a special commission that would completely examine and possibly recommend revisions of every paragraph in *The Book of Discipline* related to human sexuality. The commission would represent the different regions of a denomination on four continents as well as the varied perspectives of the church.
- **May 21, 2016:** The Council of Bishops meet in Executive Session following the close of General Conference discuss and plan for the ongoing unity of The United Methodist Church.
- **July 25, 2016:** Executive Committee of Council of Bishops approve framework for implementing the **Commission on a Way Forward** and discussed possible scenarios for a Special of the General Conference. The Council adopted a **purpose statement** for the Commission, including its **mission, vision and scope**, and determined that it will be composed of 20-25 members to be identified by August 31 with a target of October for an initial meeting. Each bishop would nominate up to five persons. Bishops **Ken Carter**, **Sandra Steiner Ball** and **David Yemba** selected to serve as a team of moderators to preside, provide spiritual guidance and pastoral care.
- **August 18, 2016:** Bishop **Debra Wallace-Padgett** of the North Alabama Conference, who chairs the “Council Life Together” team, and **Bishop Al Gwinn**, who leads the prayer subcommittee of the Council of Bishops, chosen to design and guide a complementary prayer initiative called “Praying Our Way Forward.” In the first phase of the endeavor, the bishops of the church were asked to pledge 15 minutes a day in prayer for the selection and initial work of the Commission on A Way Forward.
- **October 24, 2016:** The Council of Bishops announces the 32 members of the Commission on a Way Forward. See full list on Page XX.
- **December 19, 2016:** Council of Bishops announces second phase the “Praying Our Way Forward” initiative to be launched New Year’s Day with **75 weeks of focused prayer** for The UMC. The effort will begin January 1 in the North Carolina Conference, and wrap up in the West Angola Episcopal area in June 2018. Each annual conference will take one week to have intentional prayer for the mission of The United Methodist Church to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world and for the work of the Commission on a Way Forward.
- **January 23-26, 2017:** The Commission on a Way Forward held its first meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, with 32 members from nine countries in attendance. Presentations from Dawn Wiggins Hare, General Secretary of

## Commission on a Way Forward

the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women, and Erin Hawkins, General Secretary of the General Commission on Religion and Race, focused on gender, race and culture and provided some principles for self-monitoring and laid the groundwork for the group to agree on behavioral norms and build a covenant for their work together. A significant portion of the four-day meeting was spent in small group discussions, with the aim of building relationships and establishing a foundation of trust and understanding among members.

- **February 27-March 2:** Commission on a Way Forward holds second meeting in Atlanta as commission members spend time in reflection, discussion and work team meetings.
- **April 6-8:** The third meeting of the Commission on a Way Forward in held Washington D.C., with members expressed optimism at reaching consensus on a plan or plans to guide the Council of Bishops in leading The United Methodist Church into the future. The members also began discussing possible outcomes and timelines.
- **July 19-21:** The Commission on a Way Forward holds its fourth meeting on at the Wespath building in Chicago, Illinois, and issues a **Status Report**, updating the church and the leaders on the faithful work of the Commission after four meetings. See report on page 69.
- **September 18-20:** The Commission on a Way Forward meets in Berlin, Germany, to start sketching models to share with the Council of Bishops as options for finding a way forward regarding human sexuality. Members of the Commission express the need for the unity of the UMC, yet recognizing the different theological understandings and expressions on human sexuality.
- **October 30- November 1:** Commission on a Way Forward meets in Nashville
- **November 5-10:** Council of Bishops meets at Lake Junaluska
- **January 18-20, 2018:** Commission on a Way Forward meeting
- **February 25-28:** Council of Bishops meeting
- **March 19-22:** Commission on a Way Forward meeting
- **April 29-May 4:** Council of Bishops meeting
- **May 14-17:** Commission on a Way Forward meeting
- **July 8:** Deadline for Petitions to 2019 Special Session of General Conference
- **November 4-9:** Council of Bishops meeting
- **February 23-26, 2019:** Special Session of General Conference, St. Louis, Missouri. USA

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## Mission, Vision and Scope

- **Mission**

The Commission will bring together persons deeply committed to the future(s) of The United Methodist Church, with an openness to developing new relationships with each other and exploring the potential future(s) of our denomination in light of General Conference and subsequent annual, jurisdictional and central conference actions. We have a profound hope and confidence in the Triune God, and yet we acknowledge that we do this work in a climate of skepticism and distrust, from a human point of view. We are a connection, and we admit that our communion is strained; yet much transformative mission across our world is the fruit of our collaboration. The matters of human sexuality and unity are the presenting issues for a deeper conversation that surfaces different ways of interpreting Scripture and theological tradition. The work is meant to inform deliberation across the whole church and to help the Council of Bishops in their service to the next General Conference in finding a way forward.

- **Vision**

The Commission will design a way for being church that maximizes the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible, that allows for as much contextual differentiation as possible, and that balances an approach to different theological understandings of human sexuality with a desire for as much unity as possible. This unity will not be grounded in our conceptions of human sexuality, but in our affirmation of the Triune God who calls us to be a grace-filled and holy people in the Wesleyan tradition.

- **Scope**

We should be open to new ways of embodying unity that move us beyond where we are in the present impasse and cycle of action and reaction around ministry and human sexuality. Therefore, we should consider new ways of being in relationship across cultures and jurisdictions, in understandings of episcopacy, in contextual definitions of autonomy for annual conferences, and in the design and purpose of the apportionment. In reflection on the two matters of unity and human sexuality, we will fulfill our directive by considering “new forms and structures” of relationship and through the “complete examination and possible revision” of relevant paragraphs in the Book of Discipline. We will give consideration to greater freedom and flexibility to a future United Methodist Church that will redefine our present connectionality, which is showing signs of brokenness. If we ignore this work, fracturing will occur in more haphazard and even self-interested ways across the church. If we do this work only to address our preferences and self-interest, we will fail to place our complete trust in God’s steadfast love and faithfulness. If we do this work with complete surrender to God’s unlimited imagination and kingdom purposes, we will be blessed beyond our limited human imagination. God remains God; God is with us; God will never let us go. To God be the glory!

## The Accountability Covenant

*What are the covenantal practices that are so essential to our work together that we must perform them with excellence in order to fulfill our mission?*

- We covenant to pray for one another, for the Commission, for the United Methodist Church, for the mission of Christ, and for a way forward together.
- We covenant to attend all meetings unless unexpected urgencies prevent us, to prepare adequately for meetings by reading assigned books or papers, to stay engaged and focused, to participate actively in learning experiences and conversations, and to follow through with any assignments or projects that we agree to accept. We will offer our best and highest to the work of the Commission as servants of Christ and leaders of the church.
- We covenant to treat one another with respect, to assume the best in others, to represent one another in the best possible light, to speak the truth with love, and to practice and expect trustworthiness. We will each do our part to offer grace, to create an atmosphere of hospitality, and to moderate our anxiety through mutual encouragement, good humor, and with genuine love for one another.
- We covenant to listen actively to others, to seek first to understand rather than to be understood, to ask for clarity or help from others, to remain attentive to cultural, language, and contextual diversity, to be patient with one another, and to foster hopefulness and mutual encouragement.
- We covenant to maintain strict confidentiality, and so we will avoid inappropriate sharing of personal information, stories, or perspectives of other members without their consent. We will not share information about the work of the Commission that the Commission or its moderators have not granted permission for release.

**What behaviors are so harmful that they put the success of our mission at risk?**

- We covenant to avoid harmful speech toward or about others on the Commission, during our meetings and outside our meetings. We will refrain from blaming others, misrepresenting others, making judgments about others, or using derogatory speech about others or the Commission.
- We covenant to avoid the practices of interrupting others, ignoring others, discounting others, speaking for others, or exhibiting dominating or domineering behavior. We shall practice self-monitoring, gently holding one another accountable for divisive or hurtful behaviors.

## Commission on a Way Forward

- We covenant to avoid dividing into factions, politicizing our processes, and retreating into camps and silos based on ideology or regional affinities. We will intentionally seek to cultivate deeper relationships with those we do not know rather than merely spend time with those we already know.
- We covenant to restrain ourselves from distracting behaviors during our meeting sessions so that we may remain attentive to one another and to our work. We will refrain from checking emails, reading online news, and otherwise letting ourselves become distracted for outside obligations.
- We covenant to abide by the agreed-upon protocols for sharing news, information, or photos on social media.

### **Additional Commitments:**

We will use Matthew 18 as a model for how to work with each other.

Members who determine that they cannot continue to serve on the Commission will inform the Moderators of their decision, and the Moderators will communicate this to the other members of the Commission. Members who leave the Commission are asked to maintain the Accountability Covenant. The Commission would like to honor the service and contribution of those who decide to leave by surrounding them and sustaining them with prayer at their final meeting with the Commission.

# Five-Finger Voting

## HELPING MY COMMUNITY COME TO DECISION “FIVE-FINGERED VOTING”

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### What is a “five-finger vote?”






What our Commission needs is to discern together the will and direction of God and extend the opportunity for holy dialogue. **The five-finger vote is a way for us to understand where we are in the collective acceptance of an idea.** Rather than win/lose majority voting, this consensual model of determining agreement allow us to determine if and when a consensus is reached, allowing the group to move ahead when appropriate.

### The Proposal:

When it is time to test the group’s consensus on an issue, a proposal will be offered as a positive statement.

### How to participate in the five-finger vote?

When asked to hold up your hand, please be prepared to respond in one of the following ways:

				
I am in full support	I am supportive but I have a few questions	I am supportive but I have many questions	I am opposed but I am willing to not to halt the process	I am opposed and I do not want it to happen

## LGBTQ Lexicon

*Some of us may avoid talking about sexual orientation or gender identity because we're afraid we'll say the wrong thing. Recognizing this, we wanted to start a "lexicon" that our group can reference if something is unclear or we are unsure how to say something. What follows is an abbreviated version of a glossary created by the Human Rights Campaign<sup>12</sup>. We will consider this a living document that can be updated or edited as needed. As we discover how words are used differently across cultures, we might want to update this document to reflect that new learning and understanding.*

**ALLY** | A person who is not LGBTQ but shows support for LGBTQ people and promotes equality in a variety of ways.

**ANDROGYNOUS** | Identifying and/or presenting as neither distinguishably masculine nor feminine.

**ASEXUAL** | The lack of a sexual attraction or desire for other people.

**BISEXUAL** | A person emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender or gender identity though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree.

**CISGENDER** | A term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.

**CLOSETED** | Describes an LGBTQ person who has not disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity.

**COMING OUT** | The process in which a person first acknowledges, accepts and appreciates his or her sexual orientation or gender identity and begins to share that with others.

**GAY** | A person who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to members of the same gender.

**GENDER IDENTITY** | One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither – how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.

**INTERSEX** | "Intersex" is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male.<sup>3</sup>

**LESBIAN** | A woman who is emotionally, romantically or sexually attracted to other women.

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<sup>1</sup> Definitions taken from the Human Rights Campaign website are marked in blue. Any additional information or commentary beyond their definition is indicated in italics.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.isna.org/faq/what\\_is\\_intersex](http://www.isna.org/faq/what_is_intersex)



**LGBTQ** | An acronym for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer.” *The acronym is sometimes lengthened to LGBTQIA. This includes persons who identify as intersex and asexual.*

**LIVING OPENLY** | A state in which LGBTQ people are comfortably out about their sexual orientation or gender identity – where and when it feels appropriate to them.

**OUTING** | Exposing someone’s lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender identity to others without their permission. Outing someone can have serious repercussions on employment, economic stability, personal safety or religious or family situations.

**QUEER** | A term people often use to express fluid identities and orientations. Often used interchangeably with “LGBTQ.” *Queer has been used as a hurtful slur, but it has been reclaimed and adopted as a positive description of one’s identity. In some cultural contexts, the word “queer” is not associated with sexual orientation or gender identity at all. Rather it is synonymous with “odd,” “peculiar,” or “not quite right.” Sometimes it can even mean “questionable” or “suspicious.”*

**QUESTIONING** | A term used to describe people who are in the process of exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity.

**SEXUAL ORIENTATION** | An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people.

**TRANSGENDER** | An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.

## Moderators Update on Mission

**The Commission will bring together persons deeply committed to the future(s) of The United Methodist Church,**

The plural (s) assumes that we are presently on parallel tracks or living in silos, or plotting alternative futures that mean more to some part of the church than the whole. This assumption is relevant to many of our most passionate leaders in advocacy and renewal groups.

**with an openness to developing new relationships with each other and exploring the potential future(s) of our denomination in light of General Conference and subsequent annual, jurisdictional and central conference actions.**

If we want to create change, we develop relationships beyond our echo chambers. If we want to maintain the status quo, we try to fix or change those who differ from us. The exploration of the future must necessarily include major events in our denomination over the last year, including the Western Jurisdiction election, annual conference and board of ordained ministry proclamations, and negotiations with departing churches by annual conferences.

**We have a profound hope and confidence in the Triune God,**

We are more than a human institution, there is more going on here than organizational behavior, and we desire the unity that Jesus speaks of with the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit in John 17, and we believe that Jesus prays for this very reality on our behalf.

**and yet we acknowledge that we do this work in a climate of skepticism and distrust, from a human point of view.**

At the same time the church is a human institution, and we are aware of the context in which we do this work; this is most obvious in social and denominational media, which often interprets the commission's work through a hermeneutic of suspicion. This is a natural and human way of seeing the work, and may even be justified— institutions are flawed and can do harm to persons. Yet it does not capture the fullness of the commission's mission, vision or scope, which is biblical and missional in nature.

**We are a connection, and we admit that our communion is strained;**

One of the beauties of United Methodism, from the local to the global level is our connectionalism—there is strength and power in these relationships. Yet the strain upon our connection (or communion) can be heard in the spoken desire (across perspectives) for “space.” Because persons have done harm to each other, and have objectified each other, there is a natural distancing. This is more evident in the meeting of the General Conference itself and in social media characterizations.

**yet much transformative mission across our world is the fruit of our collaboration.**

## Commission on a Way Forward

This is a cautionary word, a reminder that much investment in sharing the gospel through word and action would be at risk should we not find a way forward.

**The matters of human sexuality and unity are the presenting issues for a deeper conversation that surfaces different ways of interpreting Scripture and theological tradition.**

Methodism in America has always included multiple streams of theological tradition, among them revivalism, social gospel, Boston personalism, neo-Wesleyanism, process theology, liberation theology. The present moment seems to be one that cannot abide by or include these different values. Can we embrace pluralism or diversity, or must this be the cause for division?

**The work is meant to inform deliberation across the whole church and to help the Council of Bishops in their service to the next General Conference in finding a way forward.**

Increasingly, the commission will offer models to annual conferences through the residential bishops, who are committed to leading and teaching in their own contexts and working with delegations to the Special Session of General Conference called for February 2019.

## Knowing How to Read the Signs of the Times

By Gil Rendle

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*The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus. In order to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.*

*But he replied, "At evening you say, 'It will be nice weather because the sky is bright red.' And in the morning you say, 'There will be bad weather today because the sky is cloudy.' You know how to make sense of the sky's appearance. But you are unable to recognize the signs that point to what the time is.*

*Matthew 16:1-3*

History is history because it already happened. Its completion makes history easier to understand. Looking back, the past can be seen both in context and in perspective. It fits into the pattern of larger moments and movements that swirled about in what once look like confusion but would later look more ordered and purposeful. Looking back over time allows us to understand the past that brought us to the present.

Not as easy is to stand in the current moment and to make any certain sense of the swirling of events and information that immediately surrounds us. "You know how to make sense of the skies appearance," said Jesus. For even the morning and evening skies come with a full and complete history of what the critical observer knows of the skies that came before. But, continued Jesus, "you are unable to recognize the signs that point to what the time is." Looking for signs when all the information is in the present tense is the far greater challenge, with far less secure results. Surely there must have been those times of teaching when Jesus despaired of the limits of the people that he addressed who could not perceive the future of which he was so aware.

In a sense, this may be descriptive of the moment in which the United Methodist Church now stands. Things of great portent are in the offing and it feels to many as if the future hangs in the balance. The General Conference of 2016 meeting in Portland Oregon, in historic departure from past decision-making, asked the Council of Bishops for an intervention to break the General Church's gridlock that was producing significant tensions and disagreements over issues of denominational purpose, human sexuality and social justice. The Council of Bishops chose a conciliar intervention, calling for a carefully chosen, representative "Commission" to do the hard work of recommending steps ahead – finding a way forward.

The swirling is now almost palpable. For some the outcome of the work of the Commission will determine their future relationship to the church; for others it is a distraction of lesser importance. For some there are issues of Scripture at hand, for others issues of social justice, for others issues of moral behavior, for others issues of theology, for others issues of institutional authority, for others issues of... (the list goes on.) The Commission will do its work in the shadow of the experience of the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church, the United Church of Christ and

other sister mainline churches that stumbled along their own paths of discernment. Also within the landscape are political divisions between peoples of different parties, different geographies, and different social economic levels (which by virtue of the size and geography of the United Methodist Church are all highly represented in the denomination) all of which have taken positions on issues of same-gender marriages and the acceptability of a fully lived homosexual life. In the mix as well are generational differences where the most puzzling and disturbing problems to one generation are not even a question to another generation. On the much larger (and therefore the more difficult to understand) stage, the differing impulses of individual human freedom among developing nations, in contrast to developed nations, in contrast to a global economy that discounts national differences, adds to the swirling that makes clarity even more elusive.

If the swirling is palpable, so also is the confusion of expectations. Gridlock on substantive issues is produced when there are powerful competing expectations without a central authority with sufficient power to make and implement a clear decision. If the current competing expectations have brought us to this point of gridlock, there is no reasonable expectation that there can be a way forward that will satisfy all, or even the majority, of expectations that by their contest have brought us to this place.

In time, this moment too will be history. Others who will come later will enjoy the luxury of time and perspective that will offer a more ordered understanding of what, in the immediate moment, still feels like swirl and confusion. The current competing voices will settle into a more coherent narrative of the work of the church and the movement of the Spirit. Until then, we may feel that we know the sense of the sky's appearance, but we will be "unable to recognize the signs that point to what the time is."

How then, to move ahead?

There is a critical difference between offering an explanation and offering a description. An explanation wants to provide meaning and conclusion to the current situation. It seeks to bring the current confusion to an end, treating it like a problem by offering – by means of the explanation – the solution. A description is far less ambitious. A description seeks only to draw the picture of what can be seen at this point, without attempting to claim meaning or conclusion. It is an attempt to say that, at this moment and from a particular perspective, this is what can be seen so far. The task of a description is only to support the efforts of moving ahead by offering what steppingstones can currently be seen. It does not claim to know the full path of the journey, and certainly not the destination.

What follows is only a description – one among other descriptions that could be offered if the current situation were viewed from other perspectives.

The purpose of this present description is to provide context and to identify implications of the decision of the Council of Bishops to propose a conciliar resolution to the current gridlock. Seeking to resolve great debates by acts of council have a strong history and tradition in the church. There are the

grand examples such as the Council of Jerusalem, the Diet of Worms, or the Council of Trent. There are also the host of lesser councils that have shaped and reshaped our faith traditions and denominations over the years on less grand scale. As I will argue below, a conciliar response is one among several strategies to deal with issues of change, and not, by far, the easiest path. For the people who make up the Commission, and for the people who await the product of their work, some description of what can be seen may give reason for patience, and give context for the necessity of slow, deliberate and courageous work.

There is no answer in a description. While we are waiting for the Spirit of God to move through our church in its own time we will remain being able to only "see in a mirror dimly," using St. Paul's words. As Paul continued in the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians, "Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood." Until then, it is difficult to do more than simply describe what can be seen.

1- The United Methodist Church is in the midst of competing strategies of change.

To begin the description, it is important to recognize that the conciliar intervention of The Commission on a Way Forward is, in fact, one among a number of strategies currently being employed for change (or for stasis) in the church. The Commission on a Way Forward does not do its work in isolation. There are at least five different strategies currently being employed, or being awaited. Each strategy has its own legitimate history within the church. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses; it's pluses and minuses.

Each has its own attractiveness to its particular audience because it favors their position in the larger denominational system or favors their own preferred outcome. Each has its own timeline and pace by which it will move ahead; some quicker and some much more deliberate.

As I offer these descriptions let me be clear that I have sought a neutral language that, nonetheless, has proven to be either incomplete or insensitive to the way in which participants in any of these strategies might understand themselves. While I have been aided by conversations with colleagues on The Commission on a Way Forward, any insensitivity remains mine. The purpose of these descriptions, however, remains. It is critical to recognize that there are multiple competing strategies within the church and that, of the various strategies, the conciliar approach of The Commission on a Way Forward is the most complex and difficult. In brief, following are the five strategies:

- A- The Conciliar strategy: The Commission on a Way Forward  
This strategy:
- is slow and tedious because it is required to respond to a wide array of competing constituencies that hold differences already proven to be difficult to negotiate;
  - requires a representation of constituent voices either

by participation as a member of the council or by a process of listening to voices not present among members of the council;

- is accountable to the institution that created it, and therefore must address the institutional issues created by any change it recommends;
- requires the safe and private working space that will encourage trust and risk among its members, but also requires attention to transparency to the wider church in order to solicit trust and understanding from that wider audience for its results;
- requires the approval of the larger church to implement any changes that it recommends.

B- The Movement strategy: for example- The Wesleyan Covenant Association This strategy:

- begins quickly, being both agile and responsive, because it begins with a singular constituency and does not need to negotiate competing differences in order to gather and begin;
- does not need to satisfy external expectations as it gathers, beginning with a wide invitation shaped around a set of principles or understandings of its preferred reality in the church;
- is constituted by multiple subgroups that agree on main points, but have preferences or differences of outcomes within those main points;
- needs only to negotiate its actions and decisions within a small leadership circle while claiming to represent the larger group;
- was not called forth by the institution, and therefore is not accountable for implementing changes or challenges that it presents to the institution.

C- The Obsolete / Invalid strategy: for example – post-General Conference declarations of non-compliance by individual Annual Conferences, and the Northwest Jurisdictional Conference election of a gay person to the episcopacy based on assumptions that restrictions to do so are obsolete or invalid

This strategy:

- is immediate;
- acts directly on its preferred outcomes, claiming

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justification based on recognized principles that are in conflict with the norm;

- represents non-negotiated change that comes by ignoring rules and norms currently in place;
- was not called forth by the institution, but is accountable to the institution for ignoring the established rules;
- uses unilateral action to force a responding action from the institution that will either change or further clarify the status quo.

D- The Localization strategy: for example – annual conference and local church self-determination and self-sufficiency

This strategy:

- is employed by leaders who use their local jurisdiction (i.e. within an annual conference or a local church) to determine their own response, or non-response, to larger changes;
- operates within, or at the edge, of the larger institutional norms and rules so that it is unlikely to be challenged and therefore free to escape the gridlock that operates beyond its boundaries;
- minimizes the impact of larger changes and challenges by claiming a local position that allows it to return its attention and resources to purposes and outcomes outside of the difficult gridlocked issues.

E- The Application of Law strategy: for example – The Judicial Council

This strategy: is slow and deliberate, holding action on disputed issues to its own timeline for consideration and response;

- is a normative institutional response, using current rules and legislation as well as past practices to respond to change;
- undergirds the status quo;
- is accountable to the institution as an agent of the institution, and appropriately fulfills its given purpose using the tools of the institution;
- does not lead change, but responds to change.



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While there are at least these five strategies currently operative within the church, they are not equal in any manner and cannot be appropriately measured against each other as if there is a "right" or "best" strategy. The different strategies serve different purposes and different constituencies. However, because all strategies are operative simultaneously, the landscape feels more complicated and the work of any one strategy is complicated by the actions of the others.

2- The church does not have agreement on where to start the conversation, and therefore, what results to expect.

With even a cursory overview of the newsletters, blogs, statements and articles produced by the agents, agencies, caucuses, and constituencies of the church in response to the formation of The Commission on A Way Forward, it is clear that different voices within the church have very different hopes and expectations of the work of the commission.

Among the various outcomes expected from the work of the commission are:

- unity of the various factions of the church in a newfound agreement;
- the terms and requirements of a new connection by which all parties will, or will not, recognize one another as United Methodist;
- the resolution of social justice by an admission of some part of the church that they have sinned;
- the terms of either full or limited inclusion of homosexual people within the ministries, rituals and leadership of the church;
- resolution of scriptural understanding and theological fidelity among disagreeing parties. Once again, each of these outcomes, like the strategies of change noted above, has its own legitimate history and purpose as an expectation of the people of the church. Each has its own part in our Christian heritage. However, for those who hope for agreement, the work of the Commission will be faulted if it cannot heal divisions. For those who seek social justice, the work of the commission will be seen as a failure if blame is not assigned and some positions not named a sinful. For those who seek scriptural purity or theological fidelity, the Commission will have failed if lines are drawn too broadly or interpretation is not succinct.

Because of the variety of expectations already announced concerning the work of the Commission, three further observations seem appropriate.

The first is that this earliest positioning around the various possible outcomes of the work of the Commission is an expected byproduct of the nature of the work of a conciliar strategy. Note that it is only the conciliar strategy of change, of the five strategies identified above, that is held responsible for listening to and is accountable for responding to multiple, competing constituencies. This one difference about the conciliar strategy

may be the most critical to understand. Other strategies either represent singular or limited constituencies, or choose not to recognize competing constituencies. Because the conciliar work of the Commission is expected to respond to the wider span of competing voices, it is the most complicated and most fragile of the five strategies. It is natural that there be competing expectations about the outcome of the work of the commission because there are so many different constituencies interested in the results of the work. To an extent, this is simply the nature of conciliar work. Each voice that seeks to be heard quite naturally and quite rightly, has a conclusion in mind – a preferred outcome. The work of the Commission will naturally be evaluated by each constituent voice based on whether the outcome(s) recommended by the Commission satisfies its position.

The second observation that can be offered at this early stage of the work of the Commission is that it will be regularly criticized and faulted for how it goes about its work. Again, such criticism is a natural and normative expression of people with competing expectations.

This ongoing criticism can be easily understood from the perspective of systems theory.

In a most basic model of a system there are three related components needed to produce any outcome: Input, Throughput, and Output. This simplistic model is overly linear, but it differentiates between:

- what goes into the system: the input – in this case, the people named to the Commission, their charter, the information given to them, etc.;
- the process followed by the system: the throughput – in this case, the conversations held at Commission meetings, the strategies used to listen to constituent voices, the internal and external communications used to move the work ahead, etc.; and,
- the product produced by the system: the output – in this case, the recommendations for a way forward, the insights and necessary learnings for the church to understand itself in a new way, etc.

It is important to understand that all systems that produce outcomes of any kind must be "built" in reverse. That is to say, that in order to achieve a desired outcome, the system must be constructed starting with the end in mind – then worked back to the beginning in order to identify what resources and processes are needed. An automobile manufacturer needs to start with a clear idea of the car to be produced, and then work back to determine what skills, people, facilities, and raw materials (inputs) are needed, and what processes from design to assembly (throughput) are required to achieve the production of the new car. Understanding the "backward nature" of constructing systems makes it clear that if you want a particular outcome, the appropriate resources and processes must be chosen to get you there.

If different constituent voices in the church have particular and different preferred outcomes in mind, they also have clear expectations of the particular "resources" needed and "processes" to be followed that are appropriate to

their preferred outcome. Naturally the Commission will be faulted by some for not having the "right" persons named to the Commission since the "right" people (resources) are necessary to get to the "right" outcome. Likewise the "right" processes of information gathering, listening, deliberation and communication are needed to get to the "right" outcome. If the different competing outcomes all have their appropriately different configuration of resources and processes needed to get to their anticipated outcome, it then becomes obvious that the work of the Commission will be examined and critiqued according to the standards of each of the competing outcomes – and each step of input and throughput will be critiqued and challenged along the way.

Which, then, leads to the third observation related to the outcomes of the work of the Commission. In the midst of such competing expectations of the work of the Commission, the Commission will serve the church best if it is able to clearly name its own anticipated outcome(s). The Commission should be evaluated on its work in addressing the charter that formed it, and the identified outcomes that are actually within the scope of its capacity – not on the hopes or desires of the competing outcomes of the different constituencies that surround it.

3- A way forward cannot be an extension of the same path that got us here.

Albert Einstein is to have famously said, "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used to create them." An additional description of the present moment is the fact that our current denominational gridlock is, in part, a product of being constrained by our own assumptions, polity, and normative practices. Surely there are major external forces at work ranging from past and historic debates over the appropriate use of Scripture in the life of faith, to the present culture wars that shape not only the church but politics and presidential elections as well. However, much of the constraint experienced in the church in response to the changing forces around us stems from the limits self imposed by looking at new situations through the perspective of older established rules, practices and assumptions.

To move ahead will require careful re-examination of what is expected from even the most familiar ideas and words. For example, in an earlier time of great cultural consensus such as the American post World War II era, the word "harmony" meant agreement. Life was in harmony at that time when individuals sublimated their differences, large and small, in order to participate in a consensus dominated by specific gender roles, traditional family values and behaviors, and uniformity defined by employment and membership. Now, no longer in a time of cultural consensus, the meaning of words such as "harmony" necessarily shift. "Harmony is not everyone singing the same note," observed humorist Wally Armbruster. "That is monotony. Harmony is when everyone sings their own note and then listens closely enough to others the blend their note into a song." Where once harmony meant being alike, harmony now means being respectfully different. In a similar way even the most familiar words such as "connection", or

"representation," or "community" that have been used in the past to define ourselves must be re-examined to see if past definitions are sufficient to current challenges, or whether old definitions constrain new opportunities.

Similarly, along with careful attention to our language and our assumptions, the Commission will need to carefully consider its relationship with church polity – out of which the Commission was formed, but by which the work of the Commission will be constrained. Again, considering the five different strategies of change noted above, only the conciliar strategy (the Commission) and the application of law (the Judicial Council) are constrained in their response by the polity of the church that is already in place.

Polity, like civil legislation and organizational human resources policy, is commonly retrospective agreement. Legislation and policy define already understood conditions or seek to solve already experienced problems. Legislation, it is often noted, responds to change. It does not lead change. The value of polity, policy, and legislation is that it regulates and standardizes practices to establish certainty and define terms of agreement. The limiting nature of polity, policy, and legislation is that it constrains and limits options for responding to changing circumstances.

Interestingly, the Commission on a Way Forward was called into being using the structure and polity of the church. It must report and recommend to the Council of Bishops and the General Conference which are bodies defined by the structure and polity of the church. But it is unlikely that the work of the Commission will be productive if it is limited by the current structure and polity of the church. Strangely, the future General Conference, to which the Commission will report and recommend, will find itself in the dilemma of needing to think outside of its own box in order to respond to what it, itself, has initiated. If the way forward requires a path different from the one that got us here, there are initially at least three places that we will need to give attention in order to shape the work in a different and more appropriate way.

## **#1 - Redefining Representation**

In the letter to the Philippians Paul took pains to offer his credentials:

If anyone else has reason to put their confidence in physical advantages, I have even more: I was circumcised on the eighth day. I am from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews. With respect to observing the law, I am a Pharisee. With respect to devotion to the faith, I harassed the church. With respect to righteousness under the law, I'm blameless.

Philippians 3:4-6

In order to be heard, there are times when one must be credentialed. Not just another voice, Paul was a fully credentialed Jew who came speaking of Jesus. He had lineage and experience that gave him authority. His credentials gave the Philippians both the reason and the perspective with which to listen to what he had to say.

Diversity among the members of the Commission on a Way Forward is such a necessary credential to do its work. If the Commission is to be heard with any authority, it must be a representative body that, to the best of its ability, reflects a global church that is richly diverse in gender, age, race, ethnicity, geography, gifts and needs. The diversity of the United Methodist Church has been hard won, and in most people's eyes, is still incomplete. In such a diverse, global democratic church, decisions cannot be simply pronounced from leaders in top positions or by powerful subgroups. Because the conciliar strategy to address ecclesial gridlock is the singular strategy of the five noted in this monograph to be held accountable to the wide range of constituent voices that make up our diverse denomination, one of the most critical credentials necessary to be heard is its own diversity.

However, there are times that once credentialed, a leader must be very careful not to be captured by his or her own credentials. Taking a step further in Paul's letter to the Philippians, in the very next verse Paul goes on to say, "These things were my assets, but I wrote them off as a loss for the sake of Christ. But even beyond that, I consider everything a loss in comparison with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

Philippians 3:7-8

Having credentialed himself in order to claim authority to be heard, in the very next breath Paul threw his credentials away because they interfered with the message of Christ that he wanted to bring to the people. There is a bit of a paradox when leaders need to be fully credentialed to lead, but cannot then use their credentials because the credentials actually interfere with the work that must be done.

I suggest that this is descriptive of a paradox the Commission faces in its work. It must be a representative group, or it cannot expect to be listened to by the wider church. But once constituted as a representative group, its members must take care not to represent. Historically, to be invited to represent meant to be invited to the table in order to represent the issues, needs, and preferences of the subgroup of which one is a part. By definition that means that people who are asked to represent are not expected to advance the purpose of the whole, rather they are expected to advance the agenda and preferred outcomes of the part of the whole that they represent.

Over the past number of General Conferences the various constituent voices of the church were increasingly caught in gridlock because the multiple agendas and preferences of the competing parts of the church could find no way ahead for the whole. It would be folly for the church then to gather, at great length and at great cost, a very small representative group and give them the task of finding a way forward by repeating the same contest with one another over the same differing agendas of the parts of the church that are paralyzed by gridlock in the larger body. Surely "representation" must mean something different than the contesting over different expectations and outcomes. Like the word "harmony" that shifted

its use and meaning in the culture over several decades from sameness to difference, the church now needs to consider what use and meaning is expected of representation.

Let us be clear that our common assumptions about representation, meaning contesting to advance the needs, preferences and outcomes of one's own subgroup, has a rich and appropriate history in the church. The United Methodist's lineage rests too steadily on the shoulders of older, white, North American males. It is a lineage that does not capture the richness of the full kingdom of God. Too many of our congregations still have hallways lined with portraits of white, male pastors uninterrupted until only recent years, if at all, with portraits of women or people of color. In the merger of 1964 that brought both different traditions and different races into one church, representation (i.e., a place at the table) appropriately meant access to shared power – a share of the resources and a share of the decision-making. As other races and distinct groups joined the larger body, a place at the table through representation and through caucuses was both a tool of the community that people were seeking to build and a tool of social justice that had previously been missing. Clearly, at that time, representation meant the opportunity to claim attention to the needs and preferences of one's subgroup and to negotiate to favor one's own perspective.

Representation in the service of the whole body, however, needs different definition. In this case, the need is not to find a place for missing voices at the table. That is work that gives necessary and on-going attention to our competing parts. In this case the church is trying to give attention to the whole. How do we all find a way forward together?

Representation that serves the whole needs to begin with different assumptions. The Commission needs to understand that each representative voice holds its own partial truth that is needed by the whole. One is invited to the table – not to argue for one's own preferred outcomes – but to bring one's own truth to the conversation in the service of the whole body. In this redefinition, representation calls more on a careful listening rather than forceful talking. If all who come to the table acknowledge that they only hold their own partial truth, then discerning next steps for the whole community requires careful listening and learning to complete the picture.

This new understanding of representation is captured by a meeting room used by the Board of Directors at Haverford College, a small liberal arts school outside of Philadelphia PA. In the middle of the board room in this Quaker institution is a non-weight bearing pillar that partially blocks the view of trustees who are trying to listen to their colleagues seated directly across the room on the other side of the pillar. The pillar is not structurally needed, but serves as the constant intentional reminder that in order to fully hear one's colleague it is necessary to shift out of one's own comfortable space to get the complete picture. It is the hard work of listening for what one can't understand from one's own comfortable position.

In a global church, with multiple millions of members and participants spread over several continents, it is virtually impossible to invite

all differences to the table – especially if the membership at the table is limited to 30 or 35 people. Yet to expand the table to a size reflecting all nuanced differences in the full church would be to assemble a group too large to function any differently than the full General Conference which has proven unable to do the necessary work of discernment and decision- making given its own constraints of representation, time and cost.

Again, the work of the commission on A Way Forward calls for new and different understandings. If representation is not a contest over outcomes but a shared discovery of truth, if listening is more critical than talking, then a representative body like the Commission must also be willing to listen to voices not at the table. The work of a small representative group must go beyond its own borders to listen for the other partial truths still not present in the room. Processes of listening, by engaging other groups not invited to the table, by reading, by individual conversations, by prayer and by discernment, expand the function of representation in a search for the fuller portion of partial truths that can lead to a new way forward for the whole body.

For those who remain passionately constant in their contest for their own preferred outcomes it will remain difficult to understand that being "heard" is not the same as "being agreed with." For some, being heard will never be satisfied until their preferred outcome is achieved. Such passion, undoubtedly, is a measure of the importance of the issues to those individuals. Such passion, though, makes it difficult for those so committed to a specific outcome to understand that even the clarity that drives them is only a partial truth.

However, the task of a representative group is not to measure the greatest passions within the parts of the church but to discern the most faithful path ahead for the whole church.

## **#2 - Listening for Interests over Positions**

What then does a representative group listen for if their task is to search for a way to weave partial truths into a new future for the whole? It is a careful listening, not for the most powerful positions, but for the quieter interests that lie beneath those positions.

In an earlier monograph, I described the current contest within the mainline church over same-gender marriage and the ordination of gays as a positional argument in which, on any proposition, one vocal cohort will say yes while another equally vocal cohort will say no. I noted there that:

One of the most helpful propositions guiding efforts to resolve conflict and negotiate agreements is the "truth" coming out of the work of the Harvard Negotiation Project that people do not negotiate their positions in a fight. A position is a conclusion. By whatever path, once we come to our conclusion about what is right or what is wrong, we do not negotiate further because whatever is negotiated is, by definition, no longer our established position. If our position is that Scripture says a lifestyle or behavior is right or wrong,

that position cannot be abandoned, and any negotiation toward agreement with others constitutes an abandonment of that position.

In support of any position, there are interests, which are the underlying reasons that a person claims their position. Positions are not negotiated, but interests can be. In the report on the Harvard Negotiation Project, authors Roger Fisher and William Ury (1981) use a simple story of a librarian quietly watching two men working at the same table in a library. As she watches, one man gets up and opens the large window at the end of the table. After a few minutes the other man gets up, moves to the window, and closes it. The two men have established their positions. One man's position is that the window should be open, the other man's position is that the window should be closed.

After a few minutes the first man moves back to the window and opens it again, but only half as wide as the first time. Shortly, the second man gets up again and closes the window -- all the way. (When I tell this story to groups I commonly ask people to predict what the second man will do with a half opened window. The most common answer is that he will close the window a quarter of the way, anticipating compromise as a solution to the situation. But a quarter-open window is still an open window. The second man's position is closed, not open. Positions are not negotiable. A partially open window is still open, and that is not acceptable to the second man who wants the window closed.) At this point in the story, intrigued, the librarian moves to the two men at the table and begins to explore their interests underlying their positional contest about the window. When she asks the first man why he wants the window open, he explains that he is working on a project with a looming deadline and that he feels sleepy from the warm, stuffy library air. He wants fresh air. The librarian now has a better idea of the interests this man is trying to satisfy. Turning to the second man she asks why he closes the window. He reports that he is also working on a project and each time the window is open his papers blow about and he is distracted. Behind both positions lie interests that justify the contested positions.

Positions are not negotiable, but interests are. After careful listening for the interests, the librarian can now suggest multiple ways forward for the two men. She can suggest that one man move to another table. She can offer to turn on the air conditioning. She can open the window from the top rather than from the bottom. She can tell the drowsy man where to get coffee. In fact, the alternatives for moving ahead multiply when anchored by the interests of the two men rather than by their positions.

After more than several decades of working as a consultant with congregations in conflict I have encountered many positions and I am fully aware of how difficult and laborious it is to uncover the interests beneath those positions. In fact, the interests are often hidden from the very people who hold a position because it is their position and their preferred outcomes that capture most of their attention.

However, lying within this difficult work is both the possibility and the problem of the Commission on a Way Forward. The problem is that



many people in a conflicted situation do not agree to engage a consultant (or a Commission) in order to explore their competing interests and to learn new ways of being community or to be reminded of their spiritual discipline of regarding one another with open hearts. What many want from a consultant is the naming of winners and losers in their contest, and a "good" consultant is one who agrees with their side of the argument. The problem faced by the Commission is it faces a similar challenge with the most positional voices in the current contest. The possibility that lies within the works of the Commission is the opportunity of escaping the zero-sum game of winners and losers by treating interests as a reflection of a more authentic community – one that has greater room and tolerance for both one another's hopes and pains. Those who have studied both the function and the meaning of community (for example: Peter Block, Parker Palmer or Scott Peck) are clear that authentic community is achieved only through deep structured dialogue that makes it safe for people to risk engaging their differences. Such dialogue often happens best when managed carefully in the midst of a crisis. Those that resist the deep dialogue by clinging to politeness, denial, or the contest of winning and losing, do not venture beyond the earliest stages of pseudo-community. They get to talk about themselves as community without experiencing it.

### **#3 - Escaping Assumptions about Structure and Policy**

Which brings us to the third of the places that the Commission will need to give its attention in order to shape a different and more appropriate way forward. Once again the Commission will need to consider the paradox of needing credentials only to be limited or constrained by the very credentials required. It is safe to assume that a person would not be named to the Commission on a Way Forward unless that person has established himself or herself as a leader in some part of, or in the larger, church. Commission members are, indeed, credentialed people. Such leadership within the church requires familiarity and facility of working with both the structure and the polity of the church, as it is, in order to be credentialed. Such familiarity builds assumptions in normative practices about "how things should be" regarding structure and polity. Yet, it is likely, that as Einstein said, we will not be able to solve our current gridlock and contests with the same thinking and assumptions that were used to get here. We are caught by the paradox again – unless Commission members intentionally set aside their credentialed assumptions as they do their work.

To deepen the dilemma, consider that the General Conference of the United Methodist Church is likely the most credentialed of groups given leadership in the church – people vetted by vote in their own annual conferences and people in required or ex officio roles because of their position and experience of working in the church, as it is. It might be hard to find a decision-making, representative body of leaders more schooled in the structure and the polity of the denomination. And yet, it is this highly credentialed body that is to receive the report and recommendations of the

work of the Commission through the Council of Bishops. It is not difficult to imagine that a General Conference would reflexively begin to examine any report of learnings or recommendations from the Commission through their credentialed, normative filter by looking for conformity to the established structure and polity of the church, as it is. The paradox is encountered again -- unless the Council of Bishops and the General Conference are intentional about setting aside assumptions hard earned as credentialed people.

For example, organizational theory has long noted the pendular swing that all types of organizations (governments, military, businesses, schools, religious denominations) regularly go through between behaving in centralized and decentralized ways. A centralized organization is bureaucratic. It is orderly, operating with a top-down, chain of command system of decision-making and communication. Centralized organizations take advantage of divisions of labor. The advantages of centralized organizations are order, control, alignment and efficiency. The disadvantages of centralized organizations are slowness and rigidity, competing silos, organizational expense, and an inability to change.

When organizations experience too much of the disadvantages of their highly centralized ways, they "correct" by pushing their pendulum in the opposite direction. They begin to decentralize. More decision-making is given to the leaders at the edges of the organization and is no longer reserved only for those at the top. Interdepartmental or interdisciplinary teams are formed to break through silos. Uniformity is sacrificed for contextual appropriateness. The advantages of decentralized organizations are quickness and agility, responsiveness to the customer / client / mission, more nuanced decision-making by those closest to the work, and the ability to change while on the move. The disadvantages of decentralized organizations are lack of order and alignment, miscommunication, competing decisions made in different parts of the organization, and a lack of certainty among the members/employees of the organization.

Again, when organizations experienced too much of the disadvantages of being decentralized they begin to "re-correct" by pushing the pendulum in the opposite direction, back toward centralization. (For a helpful and popular examination of centralized and decentralized organizations see *The Starfish and The Spider* by Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom, 2006.)

The swing between centralized and decentralized modes occurs in both major and minor cycles. The minor cycles happen with great regularity as organizations correct, adjust, and problem solve. Rigidity is replaced with flexibility until confusion mounts and new rules or old standards are imposed to bring things under control again.

The major cycles are more historic in proportion, often spanning multiple decades or even centuries. The most recent major cycle that captured much more than just the past century has been dominated by centralized organizations. An anthropologist once observed that the first "computer" invented was the British Empire. British education heavily

prioritized reading, arithmetic and handwriting. The British insight was that if all of its people could read, do math, and read one another's handwriting, then order, consistency and control could be maintained even in the farthest flung corners of the Empire. More than a centralized organization, it was a centralized empire.

The application of systems thinking, of the sciences, and the behavioral attention of Taylorism increased centralization as the dominant mode of organization in the 20th century despite its growing disadvantages experienced by the end of that century. Recent decades give evidence of the pendulum now beginning to swing to preference more decentralized organizations that give decision-making to micro powers rather than to bureaucracies and that favor fluid global economies over the controlling constraints of national economies. Nonetheless, our dominant experience is of highly centralized organizations.

All of this is to say that one of the contextual realities facing the church is that it's credentialed leaders have all been born into, and developed their leadership during, the most pronounced cycle of centralization of the past centuries. It has been noted that the Book of Discipline has expanded in size and complexity at a rate similar to the United States IRS tax code. The Book of Discipline is both a product of and the tool to be used by a highly centralized organization. Despite the limitations of rigidity, complexity, and inability to change, leaders nonetheless defer to our assumptions of centralization assuming new forms must be tested by past regulations. Like case-based public law, the church still tests new questions and challenges using judicial or legislative decisions made in the past. It is hard to remember that the bulk of our current assumptions, structures, polity and practices have largely been in place for less than one quarter of the history of our denomination. It is hard to escape this influence when the full 100% of the life and experience of our current leadership is so fully grounded in that same most recent one quarter of history.

If a way forward cannot simply be an extension of the same path that got the church to this point, then the work of the Commission may need to hold loosely, or even challenge, the very assumptions upon which their credentialed leadership is based.

#### **#4- The Search for the One-Footed Rock**

The final description to be offered here is related to one of the central contentions facing the United Methodist Church today, which several of the strategies of change noted above are seeking to negotiate. It is the question of what does it mean, today, to be United Methodist. It is the question of identity. What purpose must one hold, what must one believe, what must one do or not do in order to be United Methodist?

All living organisms (plants, animals, and organizations) must have permeable boundaries in order to exist. Nothing living is fully self-sufficient unto itself, or can escape a vibrant, on-going interchange with the very environment that sustains it. Plants need constant connection with their

environments so that sun, soil, and water can provide nutrients across the plant's boundaries – and so that oxygen can be respired and seeds can be thrown back across the same boundary. Similar statements can be made about people and organizations. Local congregations have to be able to allow new people and ideas into their fellowship and to release them to leave – back and forth across a permeable barrier. As the environment shifts, living organizations change and adapt. In order to remain vital plants learn to leech water from the air when there is too little in the soil. In order to remain vital, congregations learn to invite and include new generations of people and to accommodate cultural and demographic shifts – always seeking to bring new people, energy, and ideas in, while knowingly releasing the old and outlived. A permeable boundary is more than a strategy for vitality, it is a prerequisite for life. Without a permeable boundary all living things – plants, people, and organizations – quickly shrivel and die.

However, over long periods of time what may have felt like small accommodations to changes in the environment can accumulate until the organism itself is changed by what has come in and what was released. Since the beginning of Methodism the environment in which this spiritual movement has lived and thrived has changed in both modest and radical ways so that what is now common experience in the church, and the people who now make up the church, could not have been conceived at the beginning. The passion and the inventiveness of the Methodist movement/denomination have constantly managed its permeable boundary through the changes. The cultural, global, generational, and demographic shifts of the past decades have proved to be truly significant environmental changes that may be more challenging, even threatening, than other times. Nonetheless, changes – both internal and external – make an ongoing conversation of "who are we now?" both mandatory and life-giving. From the most historic councils to the host of ongoing daily "healthy" conflicts within vital congregations, the continual life-giving conversations of "who are we now?" keeps the Spirit of God connected to an ever-changing creation. The current conversations in the United Methodist Church about the essentials of the faith, and conversations about morality of behavior are necessary and life-giving. Such conversations will help the church once again to remember its identity and to remember its purpose as a community of faith. Such difficult questions will help us to reorient ourselves in a way forward in a continually changing environment.

However, it matters how we negotiate our conversations about our identity and purpose. Drawing hard lines to establish clear boundaries is not healthy. Drawing lines about belief and behavior too strictly will not make the church more vital. It may comfort some to know who is in and who is out. But very strict lines close permeable boundaries. Non-permeable boundaries threaten life.

The opposite of strict boundaries and beliefs is not a loss of identity and purpose – it is neither people who believe in just anything, nor people who simply behave as they will. The opposite of strict boundaries is the careful

management of permeable boundaries in which there is a clear and shared center; there are shifting distances from that center; and there is a porous boundary in which the culture is welcomed in and the gospel of grace is released out.

One of the images that I have used as a consultant for many years as I worked with conflicted congregations is the "one-footed rock." The question prompted by this image is what would it be like if everyone in a congregation had to keep one foot steadily anchored on the rock-hard center of the purpose of the congregation, but were free to dance with their other foot to follow the passions and discipleship of their own lives? The image of a one-footed rock was often a healthy and faithful image for people because it invited them to pursue at least two necessary conversations:

- "What makes up our central rock?" What are the essential beliefs, convictions or priorities that everyone, no matter who, must steadily support and be connected to in order to share identity and be one of "us"? One-footed rocks are best only when kept small. They do not hold long laundry lists of beliefs, behaviors and priorities or they cease being central, they become constraining. Room must be left for the other foot to dance – or else we have lost our connection to the environment.
- "How far can we dance?" If a church (or a denomination) can clearly define the rock-hard center of purpose and identity on which all must anchor their one foot, then it can begin to measure the distance to the outer edge of our boundary – the dancing distance that would allow people to faithfully place the other foot in disparate places even if there are those in the community who disagree. Healthy community is not defined by agreement. Healthy community is defined by shared purpose and identity.

One of the central conversations that has become gridlocked in the United Methodist Church is this question of our one-footed rock. There seems to be strong consensus about our purpose of making disciples of Jesus Christ and transforming the world. It is a broad purpose that easily accommodates differences and diversity. There are disciples to be made and communities to be transformed in God's kingdom, no matter how near or far, no matter how same or different. The contested part of United Methodist identity that is being challenged is what United Methodists believe and how they behave. It is the question of the one-footed rock. Where must all United Methodists stand together at the center, and how far can any individuals or subgroups dance with the other foot – even if some in the community disagree?

It is often noted that the American experience has over time prompted an homogenized Christian theology in which theological and worship differences have been increasingly muted and distinctions lost across all of our denominations. The period of cultural conformity that began in the

Depression and the Second World War and continued through the postwar period contributed heavily to this homogenization. Theological distinctions were lost in the pews and it became increasingly difficult for a Presbyterian, Lutheran or Methodist to articulate a particular understanding or conviction that made one different from the other. Particularly during a time when white, mainline Christianity increasingly served as the *de facto* "established religion" of the United States anything that reflected "mainline" melded into a larger picture with fewer and fewer distinctive edges. The great ecumenical movement of mid-20th century provided additional energy to the search for sameness among Christian faith traditions.

In any community or organization, once sameness has been pursued it is quite natural to need to understand differences. Like the pendular swing between centralization and decentralization in our organizations and communities, there is a similar polarity between sameness and difference – between that which makes people alike and that which makes people different. Similar to the in and out of respiration, the back and forth of sameness and difference provides health by keeping a balance between connection and differentiation. It is understandable then, following a time of cultural homogenization, that the church is now poised for a necessary exploration of political, regional, communal, theological and global differences.

To explore differences one needs to know what makes one unique among others.

Increasingly I have been reading books and articles naming the need to reclaim the essentials of what it means to be Methodist. Interestingly what is written either names the need for essentials without providing the essentials, or provides the essentials from the perspective of one author representing one constituent voice within the whole. It is a far more difficult task to name the central distinctions – the hard center of the one-footed rock – that represent the whole denomination with its multiple competing constituencies.

One of the more interesting and concise statements that I have found that attempts the articulation of the rock-hard essentials comes from the document on ecclesiology entitled "Wonder, Love and Praise: Sharing a Vision of the Church" from the United Methodist Committee on Faith and Order that was established in 2008. A part of the purpose of the document appears to be the need to know the markers of United Methodist identity in an ecumenical world of communities of faith. The three markers suggested are:

- 1- The scope of grace (in two senses)
  - God's love extends to all of God's creatures and not just to some... Among other things, this accounts for the emphasis placed in the United Methodist Church upon full inclusion in membership and ministry, so that the church might be a faithful sign of the scope of God's grace. (lines 851 – 857)

- It is the affirmation that as God's grace is received in the freedom that it creates, it is transformative. It leads us, as Wesley said, to a "real change" within the recipient. (lines 860 – 862)
- 2- A second marker of United Methodist identity – related to the third distinctive conviction of our heritage, dealing with the community-forming intent of the love of God – goes by the name of "connectionalism."... Our "itinerant" ministry, the superintendency, and the system of conferences are intended as instruments of connectionalism. All three are intended to focus an ethos and practice of mutual support and mutual accountability, of shared oversight... and of the strengthening of all by the gifts of all. (lines 890 – 900)
- 3- The third mark of United Methodist identity to be offered is closely related to the first two, and might be seen as an implication of them. It is a commitment to theological reflection as the task of the whole church. (lines 911 – 915).

Part of what is being tested within the current controversy in the United Methodist church is whether such concise statements of identity are sufficient. Is such a sparse but hard center of the one-footed rock sufficient to keep all feet grounded together in shared connection? Does such a hard center allow freedom for the other feet to dance into divergent mission fields that have very disparate, even contradictory, needs of the Gospel of Christ? If more is added to the hard center, how much more can be added until our identity is a constraint on mission instead of a foundation for it?

Methodists have always lived in the tension between what is central and what is peripheral, what is constant and what is changing. This tension is affirmed and included in our Book of Discipline by addressing both our doctrinal standards (our one foot on hard, central truth) and our theological task (our capacity to "dance" more freely for missional purpose). These two parts of a shared tension are presented together in Part II, paragraphs 101 through 104. Consider this portion of paragraph 104 in the Book of Discipline:

The theological task, though related to the Church's doctrinal expressions, serves a different function. Our doctrinal affirmations assist us in the discernment of Christian truth in ever-changing contexts. Our theological task includes the testing, renewal, elaboration, and application of our doctrinal perspective in carrying out our calling "to spread scriptural holiness over these lands."

The Commission on a Way Forward is one of several of the strategies noted in this monograph which seeks to reformulate again this tension between what is constant and what is changing, what is our doctrinal standard and what is our theological task. It will not be the last time our church will have this conversation. But managing this tension can never be a search for winners and losers, for those in and those out. It is a search for

health and faithfulness, the respiratory inhaling and exhaling that keeps the church's purpose connected to its environment, which is the mission field in which it has been placed.

Conclusion: Is the work of the Commission possible to do?

Descriptions such as this monograph don't seek to direct, and they certainly don't predict. This description, however, seeks to make clear that the work of the Commission on A Way Forward will be difficult – constrained by assumptions, structures and norms already in place, and subject to the concerns and criticisms of the multiple competing constituencies that will watch and wait for results. The results of the Commission will dually depend upon the skill and courage of Commission members, and also upon the grace, patience and support of the larger church for which the Commission does it work. What is clear is that the Commission is one of at least five active strategies that seek to change, clarify or stabilize the church. Such multiple efforts together usher the church into an unfrozen time.

The ebb and flow of frozen and unfrozen stages is a recognized characteristic of healthy organizations and cultures alike. Frozen times are when rules are in place, practices are standardized, assumptions are shared and purpose is constant. Calmness and stability rule the day. Because all is steady and familiar, it is a time of performance, productivity and efficiency. But, it is also a time in which leaders find it most difficult, perhaps impossible, to introduce real change at any depth. Because of the lack of deep change, over-extended frozen periods make both organizations and cultures brittle and vulnerable. Continuing unchanged for too long, they are left behind in an environment that is constantly shifting and adjusting. No organization or culture can live in an extended frozen, stable, comfortable mode.

By contrast, the unfrozen stage is exemplified by questions and discomfort. Rules are questioned, efforts and experiments of new practices are surfaced, and assumptions are challenged. This is an uncomfortable stage of not knowing and of not being sure. Nonetheless, good leaders look for and welcome the unfrozen moments, recognizing the opportunity to introduce questions that can reposition and repurpose the organization for the future.

Spiritual wilderness experiences are unfrozen moments in which that which we once knew of ourselves no longer holds, but the new promise has not yet been discovered. Unfrozen spiritual moments are not pleasant, but they are productive. Leaving Egypt, the Israelites went into the wilderness with the identity of slaves - and came out of the wilderness with a new identity as a nation. There is much to be learned in the wilderness, and much to be endured. But the wilderness is where God shapes and reshapes people and where new chapters of faithfulness are formed.

With prayer and with courage, the church has formed a commission



### Commission on a Way Forward

to explore the next spiritual wilderness. The church does not yet know how to read all of the signs in that wilderness – being easily overwhelmed by the swirl of the present tense. But, in the past God reshaped both the church and the people in such wildernesses. May it be so again.

## Today's Untied Methodism

Living with/into Its Two Centuries of Regular Division

By Russell E. Richey

William R. Cannon Distinguished Professor of Church History Emeritus  
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A. By a majority of the preachers.

Q. 22. What power is vested in the Presbytery by this choice?

A. 1st. To administer the ordinances themselves. 2d. To authorize any other preacher or preachers approved of by them, by the form of laying on of hands and of prayer.<sup>4</sup>

Word that such a declaration of independence would occur had gotten to the still hiding Francis Asbury. He endeavored to prevent the anticipated revolution by convening an “irregular” conference the prior month in Delaware.<sup>5</sup> It queried:

Quest. 10. *Shall we guard against a separation from the church, directly or indirectly?*

Ans. By all Means.<sup>6</sup>

The following year, Asbury’s cabal threw the duly-called Americanizers out of Methodism. It queried:

Quest. 12. *Shall we continue in close connexion with the church, and press our people to a closer communion with her?*

...

Ans. Yes

Quest. 20. *Does this whole conference disapprove the step our brethren have taken in Virginia?*

Ans. Yes.

Quest. 21. *Do we look upon them no longer as Methodists in connexion with Mr. Wesley and us till they come back?*

Ans. Agreed.<sup>7</sup>

Asbury and colleagues eventually convinced the Americanizers to wait for John Wesley’s provision for ecclesial order and the schism was healed.

This schism is treated with a little detail to show several factors about divisions. First, each side wanted the best for the American Methodist movement and its little body of members. Second, proper protocol may well be with the losers, not the

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<sup>4</sup> Minutes of a Conference held at Roger Thomson’s in Fluvanna County, Va, May 18, 1779, in “Minutes of Conference from the year 1774 to the year 1779,” *Western Christian Advocate* 4/5 (May 26, 1837), 18–19. This version of the minutes was kept by Philip Gatch.

<sup>5</sup> “Quest. 8. *Why was the Delaware conference held?* Ans. For the convenience of the preachers in the northern stations, that we all might have an opportunity of meeting in conference; it being unadvisable for brother Asbury and brother Ruff, with some others, to attend in Virginia; it is considered also as preparatory to the conference in Virginia.” *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, Annually Held in America; From 1773 to 1813, Inclusive* (New York: Published by Daniel Hitt & Thomas Ware for the Methodist Connexion in The United States, 1813), 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 25–26.

winners, as in this skirmish. Third, in the Fluvanna division as in a number which followed, the two parties were of comparable size. Finally, some schism words and schismatic tunes seem to ‘get’ forgotten, the losing party is made to appear off Wesleyan key, and Methodism fixes the church’s hymnbook-history on the winner’s score. So Fluvanna’s actions, noted above (and again from the regularly appointed and convened conference), did not make it into *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, Annually Held in America; From 1773 to 1813, Inclusive*. Instead, only the appointments appear. The following year’s *Minutes* begin with Quest.1 “What Preachers do now agree to sit in conference on the original plan, as Methodists?” And the *Minutes* then proceed into strategizing, as noted above, at Asbury’s directive.<sup>8</sup>

### Abstract

Over its first century, American Methodism divided **structurally** every decade.<sup>9</sup> Many of those divisions live on today as separate denominations (as will be noted below). The twentieth century, on a first glance, looks to have sought unity and the healing of earlier divisions. In fact, schism continued but in a new mode. Concerns, initiatives, protests and campaigns found new divisive measures to suffice—in **conviction**, **cause** and **caucus**. Methodism’s third century—at least within the United States—seems to be one of continued conflict, of steady decline, and of exploring our own role in the increasingly post-denominational age.

Divisive issues and the divisional schemes with which our United Methodism struggles represent today’s versions of a long, long, indeed, a constitutive pattern. The fact of prior schisms neither excuses separatist antics today nor demands that our church’s parties yield on commitments they deem to be Biblical or ethical or faithful or prophetic. Today’s antagonists—like those who pioneered our many, many prior divisions—each view their cause as deserving a higher loyalty than to the unity of Methodism. Such convictions about **the cause**—my/our sense of what’s most vital to faithful Wesleyanism—have dominated our church’s story and served as the impetus for one split after another. This essay/presentation rehearses the saga of denominational ruptures not to excuse one today but rather to suggest that monumental efforts to hold ourselves together have not always succeeded in the past. Looking back at our history of divisions we can see, I think, what incredible costs our dedication to a cause can bring. I conclude

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22, 23-24.

<sup>9</sup> The topic of division has been treated in our overview volumes: *American Methodism: A Compact History*, Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe and Jean Miller Schmidt (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012) and *The Methodist Experience in America*, Richey, Rowe and Schmidt, 2 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000, 2010), vol 1. Specific chapters in my *Methodist Connectionalism: Historical Perspectives* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2010) and *Doctrine in Experience: A Methodist Theology of Church and Ministry* (Nashville: Kingswood Books/Abingdon, 2009) treat the topic. See in the latter, for instance, “Methodist Culture Wars” and in the former “Methodism as Machine.” Division has been really a career-long interest as indicated in an array of articles and in three books: *Denominationalism Illustrated and Explained* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, Wipf & Stock, 2013), *Reimagining Denominationalism*, co-editor and co-author with R. Bruce Mullin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994; paper edition 2010) and *Denominationalism*, editor and co-author (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977; WIPF & Stock, 2010). A number of my articles treat the topic, as for instance, “United Methodism: Its Identity as Denomination” in *Denomination: Assessing An Ecclesiological Category*, Paul Collins and Barry Ensign-George, eds. (London & New York: T & T Clark, 2011), 67-85 and the forthcoming “Denomination” in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Religion in America*.

with reflections about how to stay together even when we struggle with deep-felt commitments that seemingly demand higher commitment.

### Key Points<sup>10</sup>

- Successive 19<sup>th</sup> century contests over important societal and ethical issues broke Methodism into competitive denominations, encouraged their aggressive evangelistic/missionary outreach, so faced the separated competitive churches outward, and yielded their overall growth.
- In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the-to-unite-Methodisms avoided such schisms, indeed sought unity in various ways, permitted difference and disagreement to take conviction, cause and caucus expression, so facilitated denominational self-absorption, faced the uniting churches inward and so helped produce decline.
- Caucuses and campaigns—from the 1960s onward—and the gradual polarizing of United Methodism into relatively stable liberal and conservative camps furthered the focus within, eroded support for and reliance upon on general agencies, and perhaps threatens to divide Methodism once again.

### Dividing Structurally

In its first American century, Methodism divided **structurally** every decade. Most of those divisions live on today. A few wear fresh denominational disguise, as for instance, James O’Kelly’s in the United Church of Christ. Others bear the facial scars of ethical failure as experienced by Richard Allen and his flock—prejudicial treatment and racism that yielded the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Typically each party understood its cause as expressive of important central, perhaps even distinctive, Wesleyan values, practices, doctrines or commitments. Schism might be termed American Methodism’s ecclesial signature or to change the image, its birthright. Indeed, division predated the release of the colonial Methodists from the Wesleyan womb.

The American Revolution lured or forced out most of the British preachers that Wesley had planted on American shores. Flight of the leaders might not count as schism. Indeed leaving the little movement in the hands of colonists (and the hiding Francis Asbury) may well have permitted the radical Americanization that made the new church far different from its British mother. Achieving such empowerment produced the first full schism. During the war, the regularly called 1779 conference, met in Fluvanna County, Virginia, and declared American Methodist independence. In the formulaic Wesleyan question-and-answer fashion, it made provision for Word, Order and Sacraments.

Q. 14. What are our reasons for taking up the administration of the ordinances [sacraments] among us?

A. Because the Episcopal Establishment is now dissolved and therefore in almost all our circuits the members are without the

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<sup>10</sup>Note that the Key Points need attention.

ordinances, we believe it to be our duty.

Q. 19. What forms of ordination shall be observed, to authorize any preacher to administer?

A. By that of a Presbytery.

Q. 20. How shall the Presbytery be appointed?

If the Asbury-led cabal and later-healed Fluvanna division seems less than a real schism, consider 1784. The Christmas Conference actually effected a threefold breaking of unity—a) from the Church of England, b) from the North American Anglicans among whom the Methodists had labored and then also being reconstituted as an independent church and c) from Mr. Wesley and British Wesleyanism. To be sure, these alterations came with John Wesley's blessing, ecclesial provisions and the duly 'ordained' superintendent, Thomas Coke. But each word in its name—Methodist Episcopal Church—signaled one (or more) of the three breaks. The Methodist schismatic tradition had been set.

Perhaps the first real schism (one already alluded to) resulted from efforts of James O'Kelly that for him and his followers would protect the interests and rights of the preachers. His antics came to prominence opposing Asbury's effort to coordinate the legislative actions of the growing number of conferences—each legislating—with a council. For its adherents, the Council would coordinate the actions taken in the then eleven annual conferences. Composed of bishops and Asbury's appointees as presiding elders, the council in the judgment of historian, presiding elder, almost bishop, Jesse Lee was new, dangerous, unworkable, and not genuinely representative.<sup>11</sup>

The Council, which met in 1789 and 1790, possessed features well devised to doom it. One was the provision that its enactments required unanimity, in effect, allowing Asbury veto power. Another feature, that legislation would be binding only in concurring conferences, Lee thought also a "dangerous clause," prone to divide the connection.<sup>12</sup> James O'Kelly shared that judgment. His divisive actions became most decisive in the solution adopted by the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) in 1792, a General Conference. James O'Kelly, an erratic but prominent leader, split the church by/in demanding "democratic" rights for preachers, protesting monarchical behavior by the bishops, especially Asbury, and witnessing against slavery. The break came over a proposal made to the General Conference of that year that would have given preachers a right of appeal over their appointment, a popular initiative that seemed destined to pass.<sup>13</sup> When the legislation failed, O'Kelly's supporters, later called "Republican Methodists," walked out.

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<sup>11</sup> Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists* (Baltimore, 1810; Rutland, VT: Academy Books, 1974), 149-50; *Sketches of The Life and Travels of Rev. Thomas Ware. . . Written by Himself* (New York: G. Lane & P. P. Sandford for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1842), 181-82.

<sup>12</sup> Jno. J. Tigert, *A Constitutional History of American Episcopal Methodism*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., revised and enlarged (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1908), 244-45; Lee, *Short History*, 150-59; *The Proceedings of the Bishop and Presiding Elders of the Methodist-Episcopal Church, in Council Assembled, at Baltimore, on the First Day of December, 1789* (Baltimore, 1789) and *Minutes Taken at a Council of the Bishop and Delegated Elders of the Methodist Episcopal Church: Held at Baltimore in the State of Maryland, December 1, 1790* (Baltimore, 1790).

<sup>13</sup> For a first-hand treatment, see Lee, *Short History*, 178-80.

### Three Schisms: What Was and Is at Stake?

Why dwell on Fluvanna, the Christmas Conference and O’Kelly’s antics? The serious division of the first was healed. The Christmas Conference will not strike many United/Untied Methodists today as schismatic (though a word with Episcopalians might help on that pitch). And the O’Kelly fissure appears to have cost and resulted in little. However, each hovered over an incredibly important central commitment for American Methodism. What commitment? Conceiving of ministry and ecclesiology in terms of WORD, ORDER AND SACRAMENT. Sacrament? Fluvanna registered the centrality of the sacraments and of structures and mechanisms to ordain those who should be authorized to preside. Order? The Christmas Conference? Through Wesley’s various constituting deliveries, Coke’s ambassadorial role, *HIS* AND ASBURY’s election to the superintendency, the fashioning of the “Large Minutes” into a *Discipline*, and the conference’s assent in all this, the new American Methodist established order, American order. Word? On that platform, albeit with his own strange stage presence, stood O’Kelly. He advocated freedom for the Word, championed the preachers of the Word, and sought mechanisms for appealing punitive, unfair or inconsiderate appointments. Controversy-driven, schismatically-generated the new church achieved its signal SACRAMENT, ORDER and WORD.

A second point to note is that we United Methodists narrate these divisive episodes—and the array of those noted below—so as to accent and value our side and minimize the causes for which the ‘schismatics’ stood. Of course, when MEC, MECS and MPC unite and when EUBC and MC join, the once opposing historical apologies have to be brought into some unitive framework. But in divisions that remain, denominational sagas recall distinctive commitments, honor those who defended them, and engage the longer Wesleyan/Methodist story only far enough to reach their own beginnings.

(For illustration of that problematic pattern see narratives that this writer has produced, narratives that track the MEC->MC->UMC trajectory and that limit interest in other Methodist denominations to their departure sagas. This story-telling pattern is common. See ‘official’ versions of the ‘our own’ focus in the historical prefaces that Methodist denominations typically feature. We include the UB, ME, EA, MP and MES churches in our *Methodist Experience in America*.<sup>14</sup> We had wanted to include prefaces from churches on the other side in divisions but were discouraged by Abingdon, essentially for space reasons.)

Third we should underscore the fact that each of these three divisions unfolded in Methodism’s authority center—conference. Conference, from the start, has united AND divided us. Asbury invented and convened the Delaware Conference to counter the appointed one for Fluvanna. Asbury engineered the calling of the irregular Christmas Conference, thereby countering Wesley’s imposition of order by simple mandate, balancing the Wesley-conferred mantle on Coke with the preacher-support for himself, and effectively constituting an American church. And O’Kelly

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<sup>14</sup>The several narratives are offset on the Table of Contents in *The Methodist Experience in America: A History*.

critiqued the first unitive decision-making gathering, the Council, and traumatized the one that lives with us today, General Conference. The *Minutes* had called for seventeen annual conferences for 1791 and twenty for 1792.<sup>15</sup> How was Methodism to come to a common mind with actions and bishops migrating through the successive conferences? General Conference was and remains our unitive structure, central authority and decision-making forum. It also invites the staging of our differences and has done so from O'Kelly's day to the present.

### **Structuring Our Differences and So Dividing**

It might be helpful as we look to current disagreements to be reminded of the incredible number over Methodism's first American century. Some of the following will be very familiar. Other divisions may not on first glance warrant the schism label. The organizations for women, for instance, we typically do not treat in our narratives as separative nor would they qualify in most of our accounting as schismatic. Fully secessionist they weren't, but at times women seem to have made the WCTUs and WFMSs their churches. More to the point, these organizations though formally within the denominations foreshadowed the 20<sup>th</sup> century by conviction, cause and caucus. So, they did seem worth including in the 19<sup>th</sup> century inventory. At any rate, note that Methodism divided again and again:

- the Fluvanna schism of 1779-81 that preceded the organization of the church;
- the founding of the MEC thereby separating Methodists in 1784 from the Church of England, from their once American Anglicans compatriots, and from Wesley and British Methodism;
- separate 'prejudicial' organization also from 1780s of African Methodists upon whom were imposed: segregated class, chapel and quarterly meeting seating arrangements; substandard congregational prerogatives; and limited ministerial status (AMEs traditionally date such from 1787);
- the 1792 walk-out of James O'Kelly and supporters to form the "Republican Methodists" and the coalescence of a Primitive Methodist movement around William Hammett in Charleston the same year;
- the United Brethren and Evangelical Association which took important steps toward denominational identity in the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century;
- the New England based Reformed Methodists launched by Pliny Brett in 1814 and the formal organization of AMEs in 1816;
- the Stillwellite and AME Zion movements of the 1820s, both launched in New York City;
- the Methodist Protestants whose reform efforts traumatized successive general conferences in the 1820s and divided Methodism at its heart, in the border states (1830);
- the exiting of abolitionists to form the Wesleyan Methodist Church in 1842;

<sup>15</sup>For those projected for the two years see *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, Annually Held in America; From 1773 to 1813, Inclusive*, 107, 119.

## Commission on a Way Forward

- the split of the Methodist Episcopalals in 1844, north and south;
- the emergence of the Free Methodists in the late 1850s (formally organizing in 1860);
- the founding in 1864 of the Churches of Christ in Christian Union by MEC southern sympathizers, a church which later would emphasize its holiness not its Confederacy commitments;
- the founding (and MEC/GC recognition) in the 1860s and 1870s of the Ladies' and Pastor's Christian Union, the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and an array of similar separate orders by the MEC, MECS, MPC, UBC and EA;
- the extrusion of African Americans from the MECS in 1870 to constitute the Colored (now Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church;
- the establishment by the 1888 General Conference (MEC) of a separate ministerial office for women, deaconess, authorization and founding of training programs BUT refusal of the same GC to seat five women elected as delegates;
- the founding of the Church of the Nazarene in the 1890s.

So through our first century, we Methodists broke apart at least once a decade. Typically at stake in the division were issues, commitments, doctrines or ministries that parties to the dispute viewed as critically important. Banners in the dispute called for reaffirmation of, new foundations for, adaptation of, or alterations for established Methodist/Wesleyan policy and/or practice. To illustrate, after the Civil War and after sending its preachers into chaplaincy-type war roles, the MECS dropped the Rebel flag, lowered the societally-transformative banner and hoisted a placard for the spirituality of the church. Spirituality and segregation shared a hymnals and sang well together.

Conflicts, could and often did then, sharpen and restrict what one or both parties embraced. Division and following 'your' banner encouraged warring parties to champion theirs and reject the other's values. So United Methodists now can look over at AMEs or Wesleyans and see ritual practice or ethical commitments or leadership patterns once more broadly shared. And to an extent, conversations between and among the various Methodists do help the several churches reconsider what they are about, claim or reclaim still shared values, and identify what may have been lost, forgotten or rejected. So renewal or recommitment can come from having United Methodist involvement in the World Methodist Council, the Oxford Institute, Wesleyan Studies (in the American Academy of Religion), diverse faculties and student bodies, and so on.

On the face of it then, the 20<sup>th</sup> century may appear to have reversed the separatist spirit and put us together. So on the **structural** plane unification does indeed seem to have been our cause. Think—the Methodist Ecumenical Conference (1881) and its successor the World Methodist Council; the 1939 and 1968 unions (though the former yielded in a Southern Methodist Church); full communion agreements between the UMC and Black Methodism (AME, AMEZ, African Union and CME churches); century-long leadership in and funding of ecumenical endeavors (local,



state, national, global); efforts to united nine white and Black denominations through the Consultation on Church Union (1968-1970: gradual embrace by the UMC of its global nature; and full communion exploration with our American mother denomination, the Episcopal Church.

### **Dividing by Conviction, Cause and Caucus**

In reality, division took different forms in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. **Conviction, cause and caucus** have served to align Methodists to a banner and sometimes with non-Methodists to that banner. Others heralded the opposing cause. Our press, group gatherings, radio and now the web bring together those who share conviction, rally to the same cause, caucus whether together physically or on line. Each movement has found ways to gather and to raise its banner and to carry cause and banner into General Conferences.

Over the century we pushed and fought, again almost raising a new banner each decade—holiness, conference membership and ordination for women, the social gospel, temperance, fundamentalism, labor rights, WW 1, the peace cause, FDR's depression programs, the 1939-unity-through-national-church-wide segregation, WW 2, communism, the Great Society, and ending segregation within and without the church. On many of these great campaigns Methodists could be found among supporters and opponents/critics/supporters of another cause. The 1960s-1970s conflagrations over segregation, poverty, feminism, abortion and homosexuality and our 1968 unity birthed the array of caucuses with which the UMC lives today. Divided into one advocacy group or another, untied, it seems, we are and have long been. Or we might should say that we connected and connect now in relation to one or more of our convictions or causes and, for some of us, in our caucuses, careers, and contexts.

Division has always had its cost. The cost of the 19<sup>th</sup> century divisions should be clear. In split after split, portions of the once-united church went into separate denominations. The array of Methodisms and the membership statistics in each exhibit the cost of schism. How much greater a united Methodism would be if the Nazarene, Christian, Free, Wesleyan, AMEZ, AME and United Methodist churches would be one. But ironically, division also encouraged competition, at home and abroad. So the multiple Methodisms fought one another in and through evangelism, mission, nurture and church planting. Methodisms competed and focused **outward**. Division and competition gained membership for the warring Methodist denominations. It cost 19<sup>th</sup> century, **outward-oriented** Methodism the visibility, influence, power, and prestige that a united church might have achieved. Not so clear, perhaps, is that in not dividing and facing **inward**, Methodism suffered more insidious and perhaps much, much higher costs, especially in membership numbers and societal influence. The most dramatic and serious of the **inward** events? The uniting of MEC/MECS/MPC->MC->EUB->UMC! On various scores, it certainly can be celebrated. However, the difficult and controversial unitive processes focused significant dimensions of the leadership in the several churches **inward**, on the denomination. The 1939 unification exhibited most dramatically the costs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Methodist pattern of handling difference and dispute. Especially in the south and then as plans became clearer,

among Blacks and northern women, Methodism awoke to realize that it was transforming its polity, governance procedures, judicial arrangements, and conference structures to accommodate southern racism. Unification turned Methodism in on itself (and despite important parts it would continue to play in ecumenical and Protestant endeavor).

Costly as well were the various other 20<sup>th</sup> century controversies mentioned above. Each dispute or difference encouraged Methodists to focus on themselves—really on their allies and their opponents. The various above causes—***inwardly-orientated***—cost Methodism as they established parties and the church permitted them to recruit, to champion their causes, to build supportive structures, to seek agency and General Conference support, and to deem their campaign as real Wesleyanism or Methodism. What suffered? Only missions, Sunday school, church-planting, adaptation to and use of newer media, influence in American society. Internal ecclesial issues took center stage in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and for the denominational players now constituting United Methodism.

Until the 1960s/1970s, most of the divisions itemized above—from issues posed by the holiness/Pentecostal cause and women’s place in denominational affairs to those framed by WW 2 and communism—brought new teams onto the denominational court. One controversy’s players and coach sat when that game ended. And new teams launched their campaigns to guide the denomination. So Methodism divided afresh into newly-created ‘school’ rivalries. (I played basketball so perhaps can be forgiven for the BB metaphor.)

A new and different contest and more disabling inwardness came to full expression in the caucuses and in the divisive issues faced in church and society in the 1960s and 1970s. Instead of reconstituting and rearranging itself into successive freshly-created, issue-framed, and newly created campaigns—as Methodism had done previously—the church gradually created within itself two relatively stable, ongoing, parties. Liberal and conservative parties or wings gradually stabilized—in churches as in society and American politics—centrist positions became increasingly untenable and denominations generally became contested terrain. Currently, serious disagreements over homosexuality—to which we will turn below—divide, untie Methodism. Those demand attention but so as well do the ways in which caucuses and the various policy campaigns to direct United Methodism continue our ***inward*** orientation. An overview, then, of the ecclesial world that caucuses have created and with gratitude for recent Pew studies and other accounting as noted above.<sup>16</sup>

### Untied Methodism

- Membership in mainline Protestant denominations generally has eroded (and aged) over the last half-century; and the salience, prestige, and power of mainline denominational leadership is now contested, often bested.
- Recent sociological and demographic scholarship has found membership in a specific denomination to be less revealing of attitudes, commitments

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<sup>16</sup>For the following bulleted list, I draw on a chapter in *Methodist Connectionalism*. An earlier version appeared in my essay on “Denominationalism” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams, eds. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2010) and

and behavior than the larger religious family in which a specific denomination might be located. In its “Religious Landscape Study,” the Pew Research Center grouped denominations and findings thereon as families:

Christian (Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant and Historically Black Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, Orthodox Christian, Jehovah’s Witness and Other), Non-Christian Faiths (Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Other World Religions and Other Faiths), Unaffiliated (Atheist, Agnostic, and Nothing in particular) and Don’t Know.<sup>17</sup>

Comparable if not identical judgments come in other imaginatively researched and carefully crafted overviews of the religious scene.<sup>18</sup> Such scholarly assessments do indeed document the dramatic decline in the individual denominations and the religious families that once constituted mainline Protestantism and the flowering of an array of new or renewed religious groupings. These ‘landscaping’ assessments raise implicitly, if not explicitly, questions about the utility of “denomination” as an analytical category and even the viability of denominationalism.

- Conservative, evangelical and fundamentalist bodies and their leadership have experienced corresponding growth, vigor, visibility and political prowess, their collective membership exceeding that of the mainline and constituting over a quarter of the overall American population.
- Membership growth outside the U.S. (for us in Africa and Asia) and stagnation or decline in North America threatens long-standing patterns of assembly, governance, ethos, worship and morality (on homosexuality especially).
- Methodist ethos, values, commitment and cohesion now contend with the fact of switching, of adults shopping for a religious home after moves or childbearing, and of membership raised in other traditions or denominations--a quarter of adults no longer a part of the religion which nurtured them, a pattern that reaches 44% if switching among Protestant bodies is traced.
- Marriages across religious, confessional and denominational lines (37%), persons retaining a sense of being Methodist but no actual membership,

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<sup>17</sup> See the ongoing posted releases based on the 2014 Religious Landscape Study. Particularly pertinent to this enquiry is that for May 12, 2015, “American’s Changing Religious Landscape.”

<sup>18</sup> For comparable judgments see the portrayal of the religious panorama by my colleague, Mark Chaves in *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) drawing on two national studies. See as well Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), based on their 2006-2007 “Faith Matters” survey and utilizing an overall pattern similar to that of the Pew Research Center. For ongoing studies assessing the place of religion in American life, see the array of books by Robert Wuthnow, including *Remaking the Heartland: Middle America since the 1950s* (Published: Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

disaffiliation in younger age cohorts, and adherents experimenting with various individualistic, face-to-face or media spiritualities and meditative practices also attest the weakening of denominational identity and allegiance.

- United Methodism contends with similar patterns of congregational independence or diffidence, reflected in selection of non-standard educational materials or hymnals, diversion of collections to local or non-denominational projects, resistance to denominational programs and the removal of denominational signage.
- Competing for our congregations' business and competing with the United Methodist Publishing House and GBOD are an array of independent and/or para-church publishing houses, curricula suppliers, music licensors, bookstore chains, program franchisers, consultants and training outfits.
- Mega-churches, many independent or non-denominational, some loosely United Methodist now boast resources comparable to small denominations, with sophisticated broadcast, internet and digital presence and the capacity to meet needs heretofore supplied by denominations (training, literature, expertise, missions, new church-planting).
- Coalitions of mega-congregations and/or their church-plantings coalesce into denomination-like entities or function more loosely as quasi-denominations, offering training events and inspiration gatherings which United Methodist wannabe clergy attend.
- Single purpose, lobbying, humanitarian and mission organizations and more occasional movements, gatherings and events claim the interest, involvement, commitment and resources once channeled through congregational structures and through denominations and denominational programs (Focus on the Family, Bread for the World, Habitat for Humanity).
- Similar single-purpose, struggle, ideological or caucus groups within denominations, especially within mainline denominations, turn assemblies and conferences into contentious culture-war gatherings, tend to align into broad progressive or conservative camps, and effect connections to similar camps in other denominations and/or through religious-political-action or coalition-forming entities like the Institute of Religion and Democracy.
- Older interdenominational organizations to which we still belong and which remain financially dependent on us—state, National and World Council of Churches—once harmonizing the leadership of the mainline, function within now the ambit of culture wars, tending to retain the allegiance of the more progressive and to function as foil for the more conservative denominational leaders.
- Marginal membership attachment, congregational independence, culture war sentiments and societal prejudices engender indifference, suspicion, sometimes hostility towards the centers and symbols of our denominational identity—the regional and national headquarters and leadership—sometimes resulting in tax-resistance or other forms of revolt.

- Media ministries, newer virtual alliances and political action efforts which trade on religious sensibilities enlarge the market place within which religious expression and affiliation occur and induce consumption or invite appropriation of multiple beliefs, value systems, and ethical practices.
- Such public or digital visualizations of North America and of the world heighten awareness of American religious diversity, test tolerance levels, stimulate post 9-11 fears, and erode faith in or adherence to putative societal norms within which Protestant denominationalism has functioned (a Christian culture, public or civil religion, Judeo-Christian tradition[s]).
- And because denominational loyalty is tested on so many fronts, United Methodist leaders, boards of ordained ministry, and seminaries find themselves forced to accent confessional particularities, resulting in the strange phenomena of hyper-denominationalism contending with post-denominationalism.

Campaign causes also came to function—in media treatment if not really internally—as the ‘why,’ ‘what for,’ ‘how,’ and ‘what to do’ of the whole denomination. So liberal and conservative or comparable labeling contrasts came to be applied generally to religious adherents. Campaign causes live on. Its great beginning? The late 1960s and the 1970s.

### Caucus (or was it Cactus) Blooming?

For campaign causes the support and advocacy system, surfacing within the mainline in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, was the caucus.<sup>19</sup> National, formed by/on its own, and intent on reshaping American society, a caucus gathers/gathered those who affirmed a shared hyphenated causal identity. Caucuses and causes—*for* Hispanics, gays, lesbians, various Asian peoples, Native Americans, and ordaining of women *or against* abortion, empowering of homosexuals, constraints on missions, and ordination of women—offered their own within the church a platform and a campaign to make sure that its demands and their needs get denominational attention, acquiescence, funding, and staffing. Sometimes identity and agenda comes through the name explicitly as in Black Methodists for Church Renewal (1968). The archetypical caucus, Good News, had been founded the prior year, launching the journal bearing its name and furthering an array of preservation/conservative causes. Good News formed alliances with those sharing its convictions; established strong bonds with key Methodist/Wesleyan seminaries and colleges; created an array of institutions serving effectively as a shadow denomination; staged events, sought publicity and eventually went on the web; monitored general agencies and sought membership thereon; elected delegates to General Conference and provided them with legislation and counsel; and pursued a variety of redemptive causes.<sup>20</sup> To pursue a diverse agenda, Good News helped

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<sup>19</sup> Consult our *The Methodist Experience in America: A Sourcebook* and documents 1966a, 1970, 1972a, 1972d, 1973, 1976, 1978, 1985, 1988a for a representative but hardly exhaustive list of caucus groups and their organizing declarations.

<sup>20</sup> On Good News and its place in the larger Methodist story, see Riley B. Case, *Evangelical and Methodist: A Popular History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004). For a critique of Good News and related organizations and dwelling more on recent developments, see Leon Howell, *United Methodist @ Risk: A Wake-Up Call* (Kingston, NY:

birth an array of organizations—the Confessing Movement, the Mission Society for United Methodists, Aldersgate Renewal Ministries, the Foundation for Theological Education, Lifewatch, RENEW, Transforming Congregations, the Association for Church Renewal, and United Methodist Action (the latter, the United Methodist wing of the Institute of Religion and Democracy, or IRD. The caucus countering Good News with respect to gays and lesbians, Affirmation, emerged in 1975, a David against a Goliath or Goliath and his compatriots.

(For the array of **twenty-eight (28)** caucuses recognized quite recently in the quasi-official *United Methodist Studies: Basic Bibliographies* see below, in the Appendix.

Campaign, cause, concern, identity, ethnicity and commitment have generated an array of ways of being Methodist. A separate list of periodicals for **twenty-four (24)** “Affiliated” Groups points to yet another way in which United Methodists tie themselves. To such listing might well be added the focused programs and ventures mounted by general agencies and by various annual conferences.)

On neither the Good News coalition nor that supportive of Affirmation: United Methodists for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Concerns will this essay focus.<sup>21</sup> Instead, here we look at what caucus politics rendered early in the way of the judgments and attitudes toward United Methodist structure and authority. To that end, we examine the way in which caucus-politics sabotaged—at times deliberately, more often inadvertently—what had once been Methodist glory—board and agency resourcing, capable professional leadership, national standards, centralized production, efficiencies of scale, common resourcing, proportional fiscal obligations, unified decision-making, coherent denominational policy, easily recognized packaging, familiar products, dependable quality. Unless the agency could be viewed as on your caucus’s side, they were to be ignored, pilloried. And the latter was what grabbed attention. Bureaucracy has become a slur word.

That negative reading surfaced powerfully after the 1960s—after the Civil Rights and Anti-War campaigns and for United Methodists after the 1968 union and 1972 restructuring. It has continued ever since. One of the early denunciations came from my good friends and once Duke colleagues, Paul A. Mickey and the late Robert L. Wilson. Mickey associated, as I recall, with Good News. Wilson shared the mindset, if not membership. In their *What New Creation? The Agony of Church Restructure*,<sup>22</sup> they looked at bureaucracy and denominational reorganization efforts in the American Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, United Presbyterian and United Methodist Churches. What they found were crises, engulfing the denominations as a whole and focussed on their agencies.

Their findings or indictments proved sufficiently numerous to become something of a litany. In the 1968 union, national bureaucracies had been dismantled, reassembled, reshuffled, physically relocated with attendant chaos, confusion and lowered morale among executives and staff. Funding had dropped as membership

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Information Project for United Methodists), 2003. For listing of recognized caucuses see the current *United Methodist Directory*.

<sup>21</sup> For my/our treatment, see *The Methodist Experience in America: A History* chapters XIV and XV.

<sup>22</sup> (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977).

plateaued and dropped or as congregations withheld monies in anger over policies. Grass-roots anger increasingly focused on a number of controversial and high profile initiatives. Programs on which congregations and conferences depended had been cut. Distrust towards national and regional offices grew. Pointed attacks on bureaucracy, far more trenchant than those of Mickey and Wilson, resulted. Proposed remedies, sometimes concretized in term limits or other thinly disguised punitive efforts, produced morale problems in the agencies. Caucus attempts to gain footholds on boards and in their staffs intensified the political struggles by which leadership identification took place. Agencies evidenced confusion and unclarity about purposes and goals. The entire connectional scheme seemed in crisis, a crisis that Mickey and Wilson insisted, derived from underlying crises of denominational belief and purpose.

Since Mickey and Wilson wrote, a whole industry grew up producing books diagnosing the problems United Methodism (and in mainline Protestantism generally). Prescribing various antidotes, studies of the new United church treated bureaucracy as a problem and echoed the Mickey-Wilson indictments, if not always their vivid conspiratorial style. The critique of central denominational structure was echoed from within denominational apparatus in the General Council on Ministries series "Into Our Third Century." Two of the treatises *Images of the Future* by Alan K. Waltz and *Paths to Transformation: A Study of the General Agencies of The United Methodist Church* by Kristine M. Rogers and Bruce A. Rogers,<sup>23</sup> treated anti-centralization attitudes more as problem than norm but thereby added to the indictments. Bishop Richard Wilke in *And Are We Yet Alive? The Future of The United Methodist Church* found plenty of blame to spread around but certainly called for overhauling, stripping down, streamlining and reorienting of our structures.<sup>24</sup> Again, Methodist problems, the agencies. Further, long-time church researchers, Douglas W. Johnson and Alan K. Waltz, in their volume with the colorless title, *Facts and Possibilities: An Agenda for The United Methodist Church* pointed to the lack of coordination at the national level among the Council of Bishops, General Conference, and general agencies. Such indictments, it should be noted, came despite the creation in the United church of the coordinating agencies, the General Council on Finance and Administration and General Council on Ministries.<sup>25</sup> And then, the whole Council of Bishops waded in with their prophetic study and episcopal letter, *Vital Congregations, Faithful Disciples: Vision for the Church: Foundation Document*.<sup>26</sup> They too treated central agency structures as problems. Since that point, the local church has effectively replaced conference as Methodism's basic body and been placed up front in treatment of ecclesiology.

Such critiques, voiced in far less measured tones by activists, permitted the caucuses to become the church's action centers, direction setters, center-stage actors, proposal makers. Caucuses effectively Untied Methodism. Or to put, it more charitably, they made caucusing the way to do business—for bishops, conferences,

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<sup>23</sup> (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980) and (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982).

<sup>24</sup> (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986). See especially 57-64.

<sup>25</sup> (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987)

<sup>26</sup> The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church (Nashville, Tenn.: Graded Press, c1990).

general agencies as well as themselves. And ironically, the efforts to encourage the church to claim and live into its global dimensions have only enhanced and further empowered the U.S. caucuses. Particularly on homosexuality, conservatives can look to African Untied Methodists for support. Just that point I heard from a person slated to give one of the opening addresses at General Conference. Why insist on keeping Jurisdictional and Central Conferences in one church? So, I was told, by this person I knew well, we can count on their negative vote on changing homosexuality strictures. So caucuses work across Untied Methodism.

### A Path or Paths Ahead?

One might see the 21<sup>st</sup> century ecclesial divisions over human sexuality and abortion as yet another chapter in **conviction, cause** and **caucus** denominational disunity-despite-formal unity. Or perhaps it combines and/or converts the 20<sup>th</sup> century patterns into the 19<sup>th</sup> century pattern of yet-another **structural** division. My hunch—and here the historian has to give way to better analysts of the current scene—is that living as so many of us now do online, we now witness a new stage in how churches live or don't live with divisive commitments. The century-old hierarchical organizational structures—with replicated ordering at local church, district, conference and general levels; with materials and program flowing from agency down; with general superintendents really itinerating among conferences (not just their their own); with our colleges actually attracting our people and equipping our lay and clerical leadership; with our seminaries filled with Methodist faculty and students—those structures and patterns have been rupturing over the last several decades. What tells that story symbolically? Perhaps, moving GBGM out of the nation's greatest city, out of what was once Protestantism's Vatican and into a local church. Now some of our congregations boast more in professional staffing, highly schematized programming, national visibility and global profile than our agencies. We are, as a church, re-inventing ourselves.

So, how might we live as Methodists Untied over human sexuality and abortion? I don't have a ready solution. I do think that the electronic, online, web-based world already connects us, albeit around concern and interest rather than generally, inclusively, openly. Perhaps we can find a way of living in the tension between our structural ecclesial machinery and our denominational convictions, causes and caucuses. By the first, we United Methodists order, unite, ordain, program. By the second, we witness, explain, champion, reform. By the first we link through our connectional structures and offices with churches across the globe towards the day-to-come and back through the centuries to Pentecost. By the second, we live in the brokenness of today's world and urge today's Methodism towards its Biblical, Wesleyan, creedal, and ethical commitments. By the first, we remind ourselves of Trinitarian oversight of all that we're about. By the second, we claim afresh—if in diverse sometimes competitive fashion—our quadrilateral witness. Oh, well, we'll see.



## Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality

By Dr. Kyle Tau [www.gbhem.org/colloquy](http://www.gbhem.org/colloquy)

The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, in co-operation with the Association of United Methodist Theological Schools, convened an academic colloquy with the express purpose of examining the question of human sexuality and unity in The UMC. As the General Secretary of GBHEM stated it this was an opportunity for the broader church to glean the wisdom of those who have spent their life's work "loving God with their minds." The goal of the meeting was to create space for academic dialogue among professors of Methodist history, doctrine and polity in order to glean some insights that might inform the work of the Council of Bishops and the Commission on a Way Forward as they work to secure the unity of The UMC. Opening remarks by Dean Jan Love about unity as "dialogue despite the offense" and Bishop Ken Carter on the need for living with "cognitive diversity" and the danger of intellectual silos underscored this goal.

On my reading, however, the overall goal was somewhat undermined by deep division among the colloquy participants as to whether ongoing institutional unity is even possible or desirable in our current state. Dr. Morris Davis, for instance, argued that the 1939 merger prioritized institutional oneness over a real discussion of deep divisions in moral/theological convictions. The legacy of compromising a deeper engagement on such issues in favor of union was the central jurisdiction, a deeply problematic structure that is now a stain on our church's history. Dr. Russell Richey's paper argued that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Methodists experienced a structural division every decade or so, yet the churches remained outwardly focused, missionally driven and vital (in part due to competition with each other). By contrast, in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we have sought merger and institutional wholeness while focusing divisions internally into groups organized around "conviction, cause and caucus." In our present state, our internal competitions with one another and never ending attempts to shore up institutional structures have created a church that is inwardly focused, dysfunctional and self-obsessed. We still have significant missional programs, of course, but the vitality of our life and witness has been hampered by such inward looking habits.

Dr. Kevin Watson and Dr. Jack Jackson made parallel arguments that regular appeal to John Wesley's writings "Against Schism" and "The Catholic Spirit" in favor of unity ignore the criteria Wesley provides within each of those documents for separation. These criteria largely focused on the violation of one's conscience with respect to what one holds essential in Christian practice and worship. Dr. Billy Abraham's provocatively titled paper "In Defense of Mexit" explicitly argues in favor of creating space for separation. Other papers like those offered by Dr. Ted Campbell and Dr. Anne Burkholder recognize the need for us to have some space from one another but attempted to propose some overlapping geographical affiliations or synods that would formalize our current divisions but keep them housed under one united church and one General Book of Discipline.

Much of the disagreement focused around the question of whether or not homosexual practice should be considered a matter of *status confessionis*, that is

whether convictions regarding homosexuality are essential to the confessional identity of the Church. This issue was taken up specifically by Campbell and Dr. Kendall Soulen. When framed as a matter of heresy/orthodoxy or justice/oppression the question can't help but rise to the level of *status confessionis*, for either traditionalist or progressives respectively (Soulen). Various papers argued that perhaps homosexuality could be treated in the same manner as just war/pacifism within The UMC where space is made in the Discipline and rituals of the church for conscientious affirmations of either position (Soulen, Dr. L. Edward Phillips). But here is precisely where the colloquy could not agree. For many the questions surrounding homosexuality get right to the core of how the church defines sin and holiness. Given that holiness is essential in the Methodist tradition, some argue, such a significant disagreement about holiness necessitates a conscientious separation.

All of this is to say that in spite of the stated goal to find some new and creative path toward unity, what emerged was a widely-held sentiment that unity as we have often conceived of it is incredibly unlikely. However, what also emerged was a potentially fruitful, if still very unsavory, thought experiment based on Dr. Charles Wood's understanding of conciliar and pre-conciliar relationships. Wood argued that if we could reconceive a United Methodist polity around a more consciously ecumenical conciliar model we might be able to remain within one church "with one general book of discipline, some degree of common oversight, and institutional cooperation wherever possible." The conciliar principle of "subsidiarity" (the conviction that decisions should be made at the most local level wherever possible) should allow for a range of responses in the matter of LGBTQ inclusion. However, as Abraham pointed out, the current conference structure is already an attempt to be "conciliar" and Wood's use of the concept of subsidiarity would end up with something much like the "3<sup>rd</sup> way" option that has already failed at the General Conference level multiple times.

After this brief exchange in a plenary session, Wood was invited to sit in with one of the sub-groups that included Abraham, Soulen, Richey, Dr. Jean Hoeft, and Dr. Jeff Conklin-Miller. Here Wood noted that in the spectrum of conciliar relationships there are the "pre-conciliar" relationships that exist in places like the National Council of Churches where various communions are seeking unity in some conciliar future, but as of yet are not in communion with one another and do not have structures for joint discernment and decision making. The conversation, principally between Wood, Abraham and Soulen then turned to imagining some degree of conciliarity between distinct Methodist churches that exists somewhere between the full blown conciliar model (one shared decision making body and thus one BOD) and the pre-conciliar model (no shared communion or shared decision making structures).

What if, for instance, in a potential denominational split (as participants in the colloquy seemed to agree is inevitable) the newly formed bodies immediately enter with one another into a full-communion agreement much like the ones we currently have with the ELCA and other Pan-Methodist bodies (a possibility like this was also raised by Dr. Sarah Lancaster in one of the other sub-groups). The new bodies would form some new conciliar (pre-conciliar, quasi-conciliar?) body

like The United Methodist Council of Churches (no one liked the name but they were thinking on the fly) that would continue to foster conversation, cooperation and mutual witness between the bodies wherever possible. The new arrangement would reflect both our lament and penitence for our present brokenness and would demonstrate concrete hope for increased unity in the future in and through the new conciliar relationship. The new bodies would operate under their own Books of Discipline but might continue to share some program/mission functions (Publishing House, pensions, UMCOR, etc.). It is even conceivable that a new Communion of Bishops might be formed to continue fostering face-to-face relationships of leadership across the new bodies. There was a sense that re-aligning the church in this way would allow current members of The UMC to pursue more contextually responsive forms of accountability and discipline while modeling a better way forward than has been demonstrated in other mainline splits in the last decade or so.

The full communion arrangement would allow for the transferability of membership and the exchange of ordained clergy SUBJECT ALWAYS to the standards and Discipline of the receiving church, as in our current arrangements. This might also create the possibility for a shared Faith and Order committee that could produce theological texts on convergences and divergences on issues like marriage and ordination without the pressure of the results being disciplinarily binding for everyone. Back in the plenary session Campbell suggested that a reinvigorated Pan-Methodist Commission might contain some of the structural pieces needed to achieve this and by drawing upon these present relationships there might be an opportunity to increase unity and cooperation across the Pan-Methodist connection even as we acknowledge increased division and separation among current members of The UMC.

The entire thought experiment was undertaken with the acknowledgement that any split, even one that is done slowly, carefully and with the best of intentions will be endlessly messy and likely ugly. The financial implications alone will make any such structural separation incredibly complex. There was no discussion about which new churches would be formed, who would leave/who would stay, and etc. Yet the whole conversation was undertaken with a sincere attempt to think vigorously about how we might maintain as much unity in Christ as possible, even as we face the possibility of some form of institutional separation.

Any such arrangement should be undertaken only as an emergency measure after all attempts to maintain our current institutional unity have faltered. If the conversation at this colloquy is any indication, however, there seems to be a relatively strong appetite for some form of separation. Everyone is tired of the status quo and, as Bishop Carter poignantly noted at the end of the colloquy, our divisions have turned the General Conference into a place where “we do violence to one another.” The invocation of violence here, of wounding, calls to mind the image used by Albert Outler to describe the divisions of the Church as “the sixth wound of Christ – his sundered body.”<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere Outler argues that our

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<sup>27</sup> Albert C. Outler, “The Ecumenical Road Ahead” in *Albert Outler, the Churchman*, ed. Bob W Parrott, vol. 2 of The Albert Outler Library (Anderson, Ind.: Bristol

institutional divisions consist “at least in part, of scar tissue formed over the ruptures that set us on our separate ways as denominations.”<sup>28</sup> As Lancaster noted in her presentation to the colloquy, continued fights within our currently united denomination have already built up a significant amount of scar tissue. The wounding that repeatedly takes place on the floor of General Conference and elsewhere will continue to amass scar tissue until our divisions are settled in some mutually agreeable way. If there is to be a split, perhaps a thoroughly vetted, intentionally thought out, full-communion and new conciliar emergency measure might spare us from additional and unnecessary wounds. If we can emerge from this fight with as little scar tissue as possible we may yet secure some unknown future unity inconceivable to us in the present moment.

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Books, 1995), p. 39.

<sup>28</sup> Outler, *That the World May Believe* (New York: Joint Commission on Education and Cultivation, Board of Missions of the Methodist Church, 1966), p. 58. These references to Outler’s work were highlighted by Sarah Lancaster in her paper for the colloquy.

## Bible Study on Galatians 6

By Bishop Rosemarie Wenner

*Shared with Commission on a Way Forward – April 8, 2017 – Washington, D.C.*

It is a joy to look with you on Galatians. Luther called the letter to Galatians his wife. In this last chapter we will get an idea why it was so important to him. As we are looking into the text, we start with chapter 5, verse 25 so we have the context.

Galatians 5:25-6:2 (NRSV)

*25If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. 26Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another. 1My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. 2Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*

If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. My predecessor in the Episcopal Office has written a commentary on the letter on Galatians, he pointed out that there is a difference between leading by the Spirit and being guided by the Spirit. Being guided by the Spirit is much more concrete, it involves your daily life, your daily decisions. When you are guided by the Spirit you watch for guidance for concrete direction.

All of chapter 6 speaks on how this looks. It describes how disciples of Jesus Christ live in this attitude in order that they are guided by the Spirit.

Paul in the letter to Galatians takes one example and the example is the relationship between the followers of Christ, the relationship in Christian community, with fellow Christians. How does the reality in Christian community look like when we are guided by the Spirit? This is the context of the verse, verse 2, chapter 6, that we should “carry one another burdens.”

This is the New Testament word in the Daily Moravian text. They put it into another context, faithful living, living in justice, looking for goodness for all. Paul reminds us that those who are bound together because they are saved by God's grace, should look after one another, carry one another's burden. The reality in a Christian community in the context of “carry one another's burden” is the Christian community where we often are a burden for one another because of our transgressions.

The question of how we deal with that is a crucial question. There is a temptation to deal with it in a judgmental way. For someone to say, “I know what is right, you weren't faithful enough to deal with it that way.” There is a temptation that one person looks at oneself as being better than another.

Carrying one another's burden means we live together for restoration, not punishment or separation. Restoration is different than punishment or separation. Restoration does not mean you don't take seriously who we are and what we are doing. It means you journey together, engage with one another in Christian spirit of faithfulness and trust, reminding one another what we learn from God. The Holy

Spirit, the Spirit of gentleness, is meant to restore relationships.

From John Wesley in his notes:

“Sympathize with and assist each other in all your weaknesses, grievances and trials.”

This is the Christian learning how to live in an imperfect Christian community where transgression is a reality, where we sympathize with and assist one another in our weakness and in our trials.

“The law of Christ (an uncommon expression) is the law of love: this our Lord peculiarly recommends; this he makes the distinguishing mark of his disciples.”

Many say the law of Christ is the law of love. Wesley says this is the distinguishing mark of his disciples. Disciples are marked because they live with one another in the law of love. Loving one another is what they are really looking for and putting into daily relationship.

This example of relationship and community with one another is best found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *Life Together*. I have a practice from time to time to read *Life Together*. I think this is an important tool for any Christian community.

Bonhoeffer:

“Therefore will not the very moment of great disillusionment with my brother or sister be incomparably wholesome for me because it so thoroughly teaches us that both of us can never live by our own words and deeds, but only be that one Word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ? The bright day of Christian Community dawns where the early morning mists of dreamy visions are lifting.”

I was struck by that especially reading in a different language. Bonhoeffer speaks of a difficult occasion in Christian community that finds a new morning. This is the morning of the new things that is happening because the community of the followers of Christ is not composed by what we can do but the word of Jesus coming into reality. This happens as we deal with all the imperfectness and transgressions where we become a burden for one another in many reasons. We have to carry one another burden in spirit of love and gentleness.

This is connected to the Seed and Harvest image in Galatians 6:7-10 (NRSV)

7“Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. 8If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. 9So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. 10So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.”

This is the image of the wellness of the seed. Sometimes we think of putting the right seed in the right ground and then harvest will come. Here the question is on what ground we sow not so much whether we are sowing good crop.

Paul makes distinction between sowing to our own flesh in the sensing of how to

trust one's own means in terms of circumcision. The harvest, if someone is sowing to their own flesh, is corruption (Greek word *phthora* – destruction, decay, corruption)

Corruption is a certain way of evil, but corruption is a good word. Paul says that those who sow on their own ground, on their own possibility, on what they can contribute, are limited. By taking the laws seriously and demanding circumcision they sow to their own meaning and interest.

We see the sin of corruption in so many different fields. Corruption is a reality in our own lives. It includes our desire to be viewed by others in this way or that way.

The opposite Paul is emphasizing for us to live in this direction is sowing to the spirit which means to trust on what God is doing through the spirit of love. In this case, the harvest is eternal life. Not devastation, not relationship destroyed but eternal life in relation to God and one another.

How can we learn to sow to the spirit and to trust on what God is doing instead of working in our own system and thinking?

The next verses are very familiar: 10So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

John Wesley, in this notes, says: "At whatever time or place, and in whatever manner we can, in every possible kind, and in every possible degree, neighbors or strangers, good or evil, friends or enemies but especially to them who are of the household of faith, for all believers are but one family."

Galatians 6:11; 15-17 (NRSV)

11 See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!

15For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! 16As for those who will follow this rule – peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. 17From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.

Very nice words and blessings at the end but first a passionate way of pointing out what is really important to him.

These passionate words at end of passionate letter are written in own hand. Most things were not written by their own hand, they had scribes. The last few sentences are handwritten and we know the value of a hand written letter. Paul reminds the Galatians that although he is sticking with the context, he is doing it with a heart of love. He wants them to know the priority of love.

Paul's main emphasis is this question: what do you trust? What is really saving you? Is it the law or being saved by grace through Jesus Christ? He reminds the people of Galatians that people will fall apart if we focus on the wrong thing. Circumcision was wrong attempt. It was a human deed and it belongs to a system of customs. It was not what put Christ in the center. It is not what put the growing church moving forward. Are we tempted to trust human attempts more than Christ?

He was also looking at missional reality. He wanted the church to grow and flourish. He did not want people to have to follow the Jewish tradition in order to

experience the Christian tradition. Circumcision is not the new thing that is really pointing people into the future.

Paul is saying that circumcision is something a human is doing and not what the spirit of God is doing. He urges people not to urge others to be circumcised. He even says that those who urge others, do it for their own means and purpose, although they know they cannot keep all the laws.

Paul says neither circumcision nor un-circumcision is anything, new creation is everything. Faith through love is everything.

Here the new creation is everything while in 5:8 faith through love is everything. Paul is working on justification, sanctification and transformation as God's work through Christ. God is offering this to us through Christ.

Even more: trusting upon Christ who was crucified and resurrected is everything. Paul is saying, "I am not proud of the things I have done, the only thing I am pointing to is that I am safe in Christ who is crucified and resurrected and I with him."

We live in this Lenten season and starting tomorrow we go into this week where we remember what it means to be crucified with Christ. I carry the mark of Christ branded in my body. He says he is stigmatized through Christ.

Are we, brothers and sisters, "stigmatized" because we are followers of Christ, crucified with him and revived with him? Do others see the marks of Christ in us? Blessing at the end of our text (verse 18)

"May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters, Amen."

Martin Luther ends his commentary:

"This is the Apostle's farewell. He ends his Epistle as he began it by wishing the Galatians the grace of God. We can hear him say: "I have presented Christ to you, I have pleaded with you, I have reproved you, I have overlooked nothing that I thought might be of benefit to you. All I can do now is to pray that our Lord Jesus Christ would bless my Epistle and grant you the guidance of the Holy Ghost. The Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior, who gave me the strength and the grace to explain this Epistle and granted you the grace to hear it, preserve and strengthen us in faith unto the day of our redemption. To Him, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, be glory, world without end. Amen"

Thank you for listening, I hope we are guided by the word of God not only today but in the next week.



## Notes on The Anatomy of Peace

By Bishop Carter

Many of us are familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10. 25-37). It is a teaching of Jesus in response to the question posed to him, “Who is my neighbor?” And the question itself is within the greater question of how we live a life that is pleasing to God.

In the parable, a man is beaten and robbed, left on the side of the road. Later a priest and a levite come upon the beaten man, but pass by on the other side. Lastly, a Samaritan sees the victim, is moved with compassion and takes him to a place of healing.

Jesus responds to the question not with an answer, but with a story and with a very different question: “Not who is my neighbor?” or who is the source of my charity or help or kindness, but “Who is a neighbor?, meaning whose agency and action fulfills the commandment of God.

When we do harm to someone else, we are communicating a profound reality: your life for me. We are taking something from them, or using them for our own purposes.

When we do not get involved with those who are suffering or marginalized, we are saying something different: my life for me. We are not doing intentional harm, but there is neglect. We might call it is a sin of omission.

And when we act on behalf of those who have been harmed, we are offering a gift: my life for you.

I have preached, taught and reflected on the parable of the Good Samaritan for most of my life. I imagine that you have as well. It is one of the two best known parables of Jesus, the other being the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15).

In my work as a bishop and as one of the moderators of the Commission on a Way Forward, I have begun to see the parable in a new light. This is the one of glories of the teaching of Jesus—he always speaks to us, his word guides each step, like a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Psalm 119: 105).

In reading and working with *The Anatomy of Peace* (Arbinger Institute), I have learned of the distinction between our ways of behaving and our ways of being. What often communicates most powerfully is our way of being, and the way of being is related to the state of our heart (28). In every moment, we operate out of a heart at war or a heart at peace (32).

A heart at war sees the other as an object. A heart at peace sees the other as a person. A heart at war sees the other as a vehicle to our own desires, or as an obstacle to them. A heart at peace sees others in their humanity, in their own dignity.

It is clear that the robber in the parable of Jesus acts out of a heart at war. This is violence, and as readers of scripture we confess that we are often inclined to violence, in subtle or overt ways.

When we take from another person, we are privileging our own goals and desires to theirs. This happens among us as individuals, and when we engage with others whose hearts are at war this can become the work that we do as groups.

I have often sensed that what happens on the floor of a United Methodist General Conference is groups of people, many motivated by hearts at war, doing spiritual violence to one another. But I have also seen this in Annual Conference sessions, and in Charge Conferences, and in local church committee meetings. And my confession is that I have often been a willing participant in what we the spiritual violence that we incorrectly characterize as “Holy Conferencing”;

Those who pass by the carnage are content to avoid the pain, or change the subject or dismiss the voices of those who are suffering. Flight is one of the ways we respond to stress. It may seem to keep us pure, in our intentions, but it is of no benefit to those who cry out to God or to us.

The one who stops to attend to the beaten man operates out of heart at peace. Here we see those who suffer not as a category or an issue, but as persons. We move from the transactional to the relational. We do not stereotype or judge them; the instinct is begin with the state of our own heart.

For followers of Jesus, this is deeply rooted in all that God has done for us. We do often read the parable of the Good Samaritan as if we are doing the helping, as if the other is always the location of the problem (the hungry, the homeless, the addicted). But it is also true that we are in need of help, indeed that we cannot ultimately heal (save) ourselves. The apostle Paul writes, “God demonstrates his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

The person and work of Christ on our behalf is the end of our warfare—God has made peace with us through the cross and is the source of our peace (Ephesians 2).

The great challenge and the great opportunity for followers of Jesus—and this begins with each of us, and it goes to the core of who we are—is to see the other person from a heart at peace. How do we do this? I have reflected on this as well, and a part of the possibility arises from the passage of scripture that immediately follows the parable of the Good Samaritan—the story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10. 28-32). It is an invitation to contemplation, to be in the presence of Jesus and his teaching, even amidst the inevitable busyness of our lives.

A heart at peace is a gift from God, but it is surely a change that happens in us, over time, through spiritual practices. The story of God in the Bible is one of profound unity, love, salvation and peace. Yes, it is also the story of our separation, rebellion, violence, and sin. But God is greater than all of this. And this greatness is rooted in his love for us, people created in his very image. As Wesleyans we believe that our healing, our salvation is the very process of the restoration of that image.

I am not spiritualizing the present reality of our divisions: they are real, and the result in part of different interpretations of scripture and conceptions of holiness. I am convinced that our future life together must be grounded, at least among mature leaders, in the conviction that we will not violate each other, and, from the parable, that we will receive help from the most unlikely people and places, those with whom we disagree and those whom at times we are quite willing to separate from.

To see others as persons is the beginning of trust. Where there is no trust, there is a necessary centralization. Where there is trust, there is a willingness to de-centralize. Where we see others as objects, we do not adequately consider their contexts or histories. Where we see other as persons, we begin to value and honor their voices and experiences. The former is “The Danger of a Single Story” (Chimamanda Adichie). The latter is the Day of Pentecost.

As leaders of institutions, we need to take seriously the ways in which hearts at war collaborate (collude) in the escalation of conflict (Anatomy of Peace, 52). As we read in Wonder, Love and Praise, “our problem is not conflict. Our problem is in the way we sometimes deal with conflict” (935). While one on one relationships are essential, we are also called to lead our communities—our cabinets and delegations, and by extension our pastors and congregations—in a different way of being with each other. This will need to include the gospel as a foundation; here I have suggested the parable of the Good Samaritan, but there are other texts. This will need some self-examination and confession. And it will need to be contextualized across annual conferences and central conferences.

I would suggest that a framework for episcopal leaders would be to consider the following practices and questions:

1. Read the parable of the Good Samaritan.
2. Guide a conversation: Who is being harmed? (this is actually the first question in restorative justice). How do we seek to avoid suffering? And where do we see the presence of healing and restoration?
3. Teach the basic principles of a heart at war and a heart at peace.
4. Where in the church is my heart at war? And where in the church is my heart at peace?
5. What is the effect on others when I lead from a heart at war? And what is the effect on other when I lead from a heart at peace?
6. Where have I seen a heart at war among more than one person lead to collusion and escalation?
7. How can I gain a heart at peace? And why is this important?
8. What happens in institutions that are dominated by a heart at war?
9. Why would a heart at peace be a worthy pursuit, setting aside all questions of denominational unity or survival?
10. Why would a heart at peace be a worthy pursuit in our understanding of LGBTQ identity and in our relationships with LGBTQ persons?
11. What does it mean for an institutional church to exhibit the ways of being in the parable: Your life for me? My life for me? My life for you?
12. How might our church be transformed if every delegation and every bishop engaged in this work prior to doing the work of the General Conference session?

## Praying Our Way Forward

Dear Friends,

The “Offering a Way Forward” presented by the Council of Bishops at the 2016 General Conference included a commitment to lead the church in a “pause for prayer.” The result has been “Praying Our Way Forward,” a prayer initiative that parallels and undergirds the work of the Commission on a Way Forward.

It is logical for prayer to be a major part of our efforts to discern a way forward. After all, in addition to being a hallmark of the Methodist movement, prayer puts us in a posture where as a church we are asking and listening for God’s leadership.

Phase One of Praying Our Way Forward began with 84 bishops committing to pray for the work of the Commission for 15 minutes a day from August 1 through mid-November, 2016. Collectively, this equaled 21 hours of daily prayer by our Council of Bishops for our church’s future. Many bishops have continued the practice of praying daily for the Commission on a Way Forward’s work and our church’s effectiveness in mission.

Currently we are in Phase Two of the prayer initiative which involves the entire church. January 1, 2017 - June 2, 2018 every Central and Annual Conference around the world is leading our denomination in a week of prayer. Many thanks to Upper Room Ministries, United Methodist Men, United Methodist Women and United Methodist Communications for partnering with the Council of Bishops in organizing, resourcing and publicizing this phase of Praying Our Way Forward. (See web-site and resources at [umcprays.org](http://umcprays.org))

Phase Three of Praying Our Way Forward will begin in June 2018. Specifics will be forthcoming as they are finalized.

What’s ahead for the United Methodist Church? Though we do not yet know the answer, we can be certain that this season in our life has been grounded in much prayer and discernment. We join many other United Methodists all around the globe in believing that as we “Pray Our Way Forward,” God will lead us into a positive future.

Blessings,

Bishop Debra Wallace-Padgett and Bishop Al Gwinn  
Co-chairs of Praying Our Way Forward Team

# July 2017 Status Report

## Excerpts



### MISSION

"Exploring the potential future(s) of our denomination in light of General Conference and subsequent annual, jurisdictional, and central conference actions"



### VISION

"Maximize the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible, that allows for as much contextual differentiation as possible, and that balances an approach to different theological understandings of human sexuality with a desire for as much unity as possible"



### SCOPE

"Be open to new ways of embodying unity that moves us beyond where we are in the present impasse and cycle of action and reaction around ministry and human sexuality... Give consideration to greater freedom and flexibility to a future United Methodist Church that will redefine our present 'connectivity'"

[Click here for the full document](#)

## What Connects Us Now: Our Common Core

Jesus is the Vine; We are the Branches

The Apostle's and Nicene Creeds

Disciplined Engagement with Scripture

Articles of Religion/Confession of Faith

Works of Piety, Mercy and Justice

The General Rules

Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist

The Wesley Hymns

Small Group Accountability and Support  
(Class and Band Meetings)



A Connectional Way of Life that includes Superintendency, Itineracy, and Conferencing



## SKETCHING VS. PAINTING A FULL PICTURE

### HOW WE'RE DOING OUR WORK

A sketch is a rough, unfinished drawing in pencil to assist an artist in preparing a more finalized picture. Artists draw sketches with pencil in one hand and an eraser in the other, constantly correcting, improving, and redrawing. The artist gradually elaborates on the sketch with more details, and eventually adds color and texture until the painting is ready for display and critique.

At this point, the Commission is sketching models with a pencil in one hand and an eraser in the other, improving and correcting until we have something more detailed and complete to share with the Council of Bishops and the church for feedback.

## WHERE WE ARE: THE COMMISSION'S WORK THUS FAR

### GOALS FOR THE FINAL REPORT

- ◆ Driven by values of unity and mission
- ◆ Common theological center
- ◆ A new church will not look like the current church
- ◆ Dynamic, flexible and contextual connectionalism
- ◆ It may mean a way for groups to be in ministry separately while sharing some common ministry
- ◆ Enable people with contradictory convictions to flourish
- ◆ It may mean multiple versions of the Book of Discipline
- ◆ Jesus' call to unity may look like associations or affiliated churches
- ◆ Maintain global connection in loosely configured structure
- ◆ Allowance for those who don't adopt a revised structure



## WHERE WE ARE: THE COMMISSION'S WORK THUS FAR

### LEARNED VALUES

- ◆ We value pushing the pendulum toward looser on structure and contextualization and tighter on naming the essentials of theology and doctrine.
- ◆ We wish to honor differences in practices and non-essentials for the sake of contextual mission.
- ◆ We value simpler structure and processes and a thinner Book of Discipline.
- ◆ We value remaining connected in mission.
- ◆ We support the freedom to contextualize.
- ◆ We are exploring many creative ways of living together including “branches,” “umbrella plans,” “affiliated connections,” “federated relationships,” and more.



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### OUR GLOBAL CONTEXT

- ◆ Concerns and goals related to human sexuality vary widely across the globe.
- ◆ The landscape in our Central Conferences is very different from the U.S. landscape.
- ◆ Conferences are not of one mind on ordination and marriage of LGBTQ persons.
- ◆ The global context is complex due to cultural, civic, and legal restrictions and freedoms that differ.
- ◆ Some changes within the U.S. church may pose a potential threat to the vital mission of our Central Conferences.
- ◆ Understanding and honoring the nuances of each central conference is critical.

## WHAT WE'VE LEARNED: The Colloquy at Emory University

### Our History

- Division, separation, mergers and branching out are part of our denominational history

### Our Reality

- The United Methodist Church is increasingly fragmented
- Many believe some sort of separation is inevitable

### We Don't Agree

- Is the church's position on marriage and ordination an essential doctrine?

### How Can the Past Inform the Future

- Is there a historical or theological analogy to the current conflict?

### Theological Diversity

- Different lenses of liberation vs oppression and orthodoxy vs heresy
- Many advocated more geographical and cultural space between parts of the church

### Identified Need

- Identified the need to recover mission and passion of the church as a movement

*From: The Colloquy on Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality at Emory University sponsored by GBHEM*

## WHAT WE'VE HEARD: Listening and Feedback from the church\*

### Communion

- The reality that we may live in communion but not under common governance

### Context

- Some envision a returning to a pre-1972 approach that allows for contextual ministry

### Mission

- Schism would be a tragic weakening of our mission while the current reality is also harming our mission

### Heartfelt Convictions

- Heartfelt differences between those who want a removal of current language and others who affirm current language

### Unity

- What kind of unity can we provide so that we can live together?

### Structure and Finances

- We need enough structural freedom so that no one has to compromise their deeply held beliefs
- Financial implications:
  - pension liability
  - support of Central Conferences
  - support of hospitals, colleges, universities, etc.

\* the church refers to feedback sent to the commission by individuals, churches, caucus groups, boards and agencies, laity, candidates for ministry, clergy, etc.



## RESOURCES

- Link to video interview with Bishop Woodie White: <https://tinyurl.com/bishopwhitevideo>
- Link to Bishop Schnase's video on sketching <https://youtu.be/53tXM0FTqW8>
- Link to Moderators perspectives on unity [www.facebook.com/umcforward/videos/1987544601527923/](http://www.facebook.com/umcforward/videos/1987544601527923/)
- Link to the PDF version of July 2016 Status Report: <https://tinyurl.com/statusreportPDF>
- Link to the video version of the 2016 Status Report: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRc\\_7VWD9Z0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRc_7VWD9Z0)
- Link to the PowerPoint Version of the 2016 Status Report: <https://tinyurl.com/statusreportPowerPoint>
- View a video of Bishops explaining the prayer initiative at Praying Our Way Forward: We are One in Christ.: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9t1cwBJxS2c>
- Link to the Unity and Human Sexuality Study <https://tinyurl.com/GBHEM-Human-Sexuality-Study>

Other studies that are happening across the church includes the following:

- Standing Committee on Central Conferences/Global Book of Discipline
- Global Social Principles
- Apportionment Sustainability Task Force
- Faith and Order
- Jurisdictional Study Task Force

## A BEGINNING SIMPLE FRAMEWORK TO DISCUSS THE WAY FORWARD

**Outcome:** The outcome is for Bishops to teach and engage in their episcopal area in dialogue around potential futures as together we seek a Way Forward.

### The Framework

- Invite leaders to be in conversation in seeking a way forward by discerning sketches of models or directions.
- Resist defining the sketches or models in terms of polity and keep to the simple descriptions below. The details of the sketches are still in the development phase by the Commission and the Council of Bishops so it would be premature to elaborate further.
- The conversation should be a dialogue that is open and invites respectful understanding of various perspectives.
- Allow the conversation to be shaped by questions, such as:
  - 1) What are the most important values and convictions to you in seeking a way forward?
  - 2) What resources help us to tell the narratives of unity in seeking a way forward?
  - 3) What are the core convictions of our faith as United Methodists?
- If participants seek a premature closure, remind them that we are in a season of prayer, conversation, visioning and discernment.

### About The Sketches of Models

- One sketch of a model affirms the current *Book of Discipline* language and places a high value on accountability.
- Another sketch of a model removes restrictive language and places a high value on contextualization. This sketch also specifically protects the rights of those whose conscience will not allow them to perform same gender weddings or ordain LGBTQ persons.
- A third sketch of a model is grounded in a unified core that includes shared doctrine and services and one COB, while also creating different branches that have clearly defined values such as accountability, contextualization and justice.
- Each sketch represents values that are within the COB and across the church.
- Each sketch includes gracious way for those who feel called to exit from the denomination.

### **Guiding questions about the sketches (“give adaptive work back to the people”):**

- 1) Based on the description, how would you build a church from this sketch?
- 2) How does this sketch multiply our Wesleyan witness and expand our mission in the world?

*Note: Reflections and reports of your conversations in your area, particularly any new or different ideas, can be sent to Alex Shanks at [ashanks@flumc.org](mailto:ashanks@flumc.org) who will share with the Commission.*

## **YOUR OWN PLAN/S**

Space for the Bishops to write their own Plans of Action over the next fifteen months



# **Council of Bishops**

The United Methodist Church



## **Officers of the Council – 2017**

President:	Bishop Bruce R. Ough
President-Designate:	Bishop Kenneth H. Carter
Secretary:	Bishop Cynthia F. Harvey
Executive Secretary:	Bishop Marcus Matthews
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