

## **WAY FORWARD CONVERSATIONS**

**Minnesota Annual Conference  
September, 2018**

### **US AND THEM: SO, HOW DO WE BE THE CHURCH?**

In February, 2019, delegates representing our global church will gather in St. Louis for four days of intense “conferencing” on the matter of homosexuality. This evening has been in large part an invitation for you and your congregation to join this critical season of conferencing and discernment regarding the direction and vision for The United Methodist Church. The question for us is: how do we be the church going into and beyond February, 2019?

This is not the first time, nor will it be the last time, that the Church of Jesus Christ across the arc of its 2,000-year history or in its various expressions (including Methodism) has come together to confer and discern about divisive matters of faith and the practice of ministry.

The narrative in Acts, chapters 10-15, relates the early church’s struggle with the acceptance and inclusion of “pagan” Gentiles. This narrative has been widely read and discussed by scholars, clergy and laypersons as an example of how the church dealt with a changing culture.

You, no doubt, know the story. Both challenges and opportunities were presented to the young church by the fact that Gentiles were enthusiastically converting to Christianity. The question of circumcision, which was a requirement of Hebraic Law (the Law of Moses) was especially salient in the debate. More conservative members of the church wanted to retain the “Jewishness” of the emerging Christian church.

Other apostles, including Paul, Peter and Barnabas, argued for full acceptance without imposition of ritual circumcision. Ultimately, the elders at the Jerusalem Council agreed to issue a letter welcoming uncircumcised followers of Jesus that announced that the “Holy Spirit has led us to a decision that no burden should be placed on you other than these essentials” of discipleship.

The Jerusalem Council is not directly analogous to the 2019 Special Session of the United Methodist General Conference. And, some scholars argue the analogy breaks down because the Jerusalem Council was about the tension between Jews and non-Jews and not about divisions between Christians with 2,000 years of shared history and core doctrine.

But, here is one truth that cannot be argued away. This is one of the earliest “us and them” stories in the Church. Us and them narratives or controversies generally develop within the community of faith when we cannot agree about the core mission, doctrine or the essential

requirements for discipleship. As some of you have heard me observe in other settings, nearly all the significant us and them divisions, and in many cases, schisms within the Methodist movement have been over what constitutes true holiness. John and Charles Wesley gave us this unique and wonderful understanding of holiness -- balanced expressions of inward transformation and outward actions all guided and governed by the Great Commandment to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and to love our neighbor as ourself. And, from nearly the beginning of the movement we have turned this distinctly Methodist way of life and discipleship into an “us and them” controversy.

Which brings us to the sin of it all. All “us and them” divisions are reduced to “we are right and they are wrong.” In a North Central Jurisdiction College of Bishops’ meeting a couple of years ago, retired Bishop Bill Lewis said he had come to the conclusion, after all his years of ministry, that the true original sin is dividing into tribes and determining that my tribe is right and your tribe is wrong. When we judge the rightness or wrongness of one another long enough; when our positions become hardened, siloed, concretized and defended long enough, we develop an idolatrous adherence to our own “rightness.”

In a recent blog, Bishop Kenneth Carder (the retired Bishop Ken Carder) wrote: “Schism as John Wesley reminds us, is a failure to love as Christ loves us. Schism transforms doctrine and the Bible into weapons of mass destruction rather than agents for the formation of Christ-like character. And it belies faith in the present and final triumph of God’s reign of compassion, justice, generosity, hospitality and joy... Let’s all repent of our idolatrous reliance on legislation and legalism and turn toward the grace that is the heart of our Wesleyan tradition...” The Jerusalem Council, by listening deeply to the movement of the Holy Spirit, avoided an idolatrous reliance on the Law of Moses and opened the early church to all humanity.

Bishop Carder’s words beg a question that has haunted me for some time.

Does the world need The United Methodist Church to teach it how to divide, or does the world need The United Methodist Church to teach it how to live together with its different theological perspectives and its different ministry contexts?

I was shocked to learn several months ago that a new industry has recently taken hold and is flourishing in the United States. There are now several companies making billions of dollars a year facilitating the self-gerrymandering of our population. Individuals and families hire these companies to seek out and re-locate them to communities of people that share their same political views, religious affiliations, race, economic status and educational levels. This self-gerrymandering is changing the political landscape in the U.S. and is contributing, in large part, to the growing divisiveness, racism and violence in the country. I do not want to be part of self-gerrymandering The United Methodist Church into homogeneous enclaves of theological, doctrinal and political thought and the practice of ministry.

What will our witness be? Will it be to the oneness that has already been achieved in God through Christ? Will we seek to reflect the wondrous mystery and beauty of the beloved community? Or will our witness be to the fatalism, divisiveness and fear reflected in a self-gerrymandering world? Will we foster unity with God and one another? Or will we contribute to the brokenness of our fractured world through sanctioned schism?

Prior to the 2016 General Conference, Abingdon Press reprinted and distributed to the conference delegates Bishop Francis Asbury's little book titled, *The Causes, Evils and Cures of Heart and Church Divisions*. It sounds like this could have been written last week. However, it was originally written by Asbury in 1792 and addressed to the Ministers and Members of The Methodist Episcopal Church.

In Part II on the Cures of Division, Asbury raises this troublesome question: "What but madness can cause one member to tear and split from another?" (page 49) But, then he goes on to suggest there are seven strong reasons to join together in unity, based on Ephesians 4:4-6 where Paul writes:

"You are one body and one spirit, just as God called you in one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all..."

*(Common English Bible)*

His seventh reason to join together is because there is One God. "Though there be three persons in the divine nature, and every person is God, yet there is but one God. Here is a union infinitely beyond all unions that any creature can be capable of. The mystery of this union is revealed to us to make us in love with union." (page 50)

I am Trinitarian. It is at the core of my orthodox theology. I am in love with the mystery of this oneness, even though I can scarcely comprehend it. Lord, have mercy on me, should I fall out of love with union! Lord, have mercy on us, should we fall out of love with union. The way for us to be the church now and in the future is to stay in love with union.

I also have a high Christology. Throughout the gospels and the epistles, unity in the Body is always about what God in Christ has done for you and me and all humankind, rather than what we believe about God. Unity is more closely related to the way of the cross than to the way of worldly power and politics. Unity is more closely related to Christ's brokenness and humility than it is our correctness. Unity is more closely related to Christ's suffering than to our winning.

It is Christ who brings us together and holds us together through his death on the cross. Listen to how Paul articulates this reality in this letter to the Ephesians:

"But now, thanks to Christ Jesus, you, who once were so far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that

divided us. He canceled the detailed rules of the Law so that he could create one new person out of the two groups, making peace. He reconciled them both as one body to God by the cross, which ended the hostility to God.”

*(Ephesians 2:13-16 Common English Bible)*

We are probably more familiar with how Paul articulates this vision in Galatians.

“There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male or female; for all of us are one in Christ Jesus.”

*(Galatians 3:28)*

This is what Jesus was talking about when he said he is the way, the truth and the life. He reconciled and made us one body by the cross. It is not my place to pass judgment, but in my considered opinion, those who argue for division or dissolution of The United Methodist Church in the name of truth, or fidelity to Christ, have a very poor, ill-informed Christology.

Shortly after Bishop Wayne Clymer’s death, I was given a copy of one of his sermons, titled, *The Center That Holds*. His text was II Corinthians 5:14-16.

“For the love of Christ leaves us no choice when once we have reached the conclusion that Christ died for all, therefore all share in his death. His purpose in dying was that all persons still in life should cease to live for themselves, and should live for him who for their sakes died and was raised to life. With us, therefore, worldly standards have ceased to count in our estimate of any persons.” *(II Corinthians 5:14-16)*

Bishop Clymer concluded his sermon with these words. “In a cruciform world there are ambiguities beyond measure and no assurance of success. But there is a center that holds. Today is the day of salvation. Let not the grace of God be wasted.” I thank God that the Jerusalem Council did not let the grace of God be wasted. I pray every day that the 2019 Special Session of General Conference will not let the grace of God be wasted. The way for us to be the Church now and in the future is to not let the grace of God in Christ be wasted.

I am Trinitarian. I have a high Christology. And, I am evangelical. I want everyone to experience the redemptive, reconciling, forgiving, saving grace of Jesus Christ. I want everyone to be invited into the discipleship journey toward holiness of heart and holiness of society. I want everyone to have a beloved community that includes them, accepts them, helps carry their burdens, equips them for life and leadership and will never let them go.

I have come to the conclusion that the solution of the Jerusalem Council was not driven by a move toward loosening accepted codes of conduct or a conviction to be radically inclusive, but by an evangelical and missional commitment to grow the kingdom of God. This seems abundantly clear by the reports of the apostles about the enthusiastic discipleship of Gentile converts and the unquestionable breakthrough of the Holy Spirit. Inclusion was not the pivotal motivation for the Jerusalem Council, but rather the radical evangelistic vision about the Kingdom of God taught by Jesus. James' speech that carried the day in the Jerusalem Council was about the fulfillment of God's mission.

When Barnabas and Paul also fell silent, James responded, "Fellow believers, listen to me. Simon reported how, in his kindness, God came to the Gentiles in the first place, to raise up from them a people of God. The prophets' words agree with this; as it is written (Amos 9:11-12):

*After this I will return,  
and I will rebuild David's fallen tent;  
I will rebuild what has been torn down.  
I will restore it so that the rest of humanity  
will seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who belong to me.  
(Acts 15:13-17)*

Friends, this is a missional statement. James was remind the council of the mission of God in and through Christ.

It seems clear, at least to me, that Jesus' missional imperatives to love God and neighbor, reach new people and heal a broken world were the ultimate framework for the Jerusalem Council's decision. Is it possible that a reframing of our United Methodist Church's evangelistic vision and de-regulating our connection will reach generations that currently consider the church's view of human sexuality to be narrow at best, bigoted at worst, and clearly hypocritical?

Peter's argument that "we and they are saved in the same way, by the grace of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 15:11) is a uniting statement, but also a confessional statement, based on our common humanity and sacred worth. It can be argued, without denigrating the importance of it, that our 45-year debate over human sexuality has sapped our energy, diverted us from important ministry and mission, and compromised our evangelistic vision. Imagine what new missional zeal and evangelistic passion for reaching new generations might be unleashed if we, like the Jerusalem Council, could unbind The United Methodist Church for truly passionate witness, service and ministry to all people. The way to be the church now and in the future is to make all decisions missional decisions.

I pray that when the delegates to the Special General conference push the keypad buttons to vote, they will push the missional button. I am convinced the One Church Plan gives us the best opportunity to stay focused on our mission to make disciples of Jesus for the transformation of the world.

The Jerusalem Council offers a biblical roadmap for how the church can radically expand its understanding of mission without sacrificing the essentials of faithful discipleship. The Jerusalem Council offers a biblical alternative to the tribalism of “us and them” that has beset our church and our culture. The Jerusalem Council offers a biblical vision for a church surrendered to the Christ of extravagant, self-sacrificing love. The Jerusalem Council offers a biblical imperative to seek unity for the sake of God’s mission in the world. The Jerusalem council demonstrates the way forward for becoming a Love First church! We can decide in this very moment to be the way forward by

- embracing what we hold in common,
- keeping the mission of God the main thing, and
- loving all as God in Christ loves all.

This is our witness. This is how we be the church of Jesus Christ!

So, we pray what we confess every time we come to the Lord’s Table:

Holy God, by your Spirit  
make us one with Christ,  
one with each other,  
and one in ministry to the world.  
Amen.

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