

## **Can we move toward a grace-filled United Methodist Church?**

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Our United Methodist Church stands at a crossroads. What a difficult process we experienced trying to find our way forward as The United Methodist Church! We knew this would not be easy, but it was as hard as anyone might have imagined. We are a wounded church. We are a divided church. We are a church in pain, and we are doing harm to each other.

My conviction and prayer would be a way forward – a pathway that would allow United Methodism to continue its mission, vision and influence as a mainline Christian witness in our world. We must arrive together the most clear, essential, Biblically faithful, theologically sound, and ethically responsible future for United Methodism.

Historically, the Christian faith is a dynamic, evolving, maturing religious movement, contextualized by the time, location, and the communities in which it is situated. Evidence of the powerful influence of the Holy Spirit is the fact that it emerged from a premodern, legalistic and dualistic culture; it adapted to a variety of primitive mythic-magic based, religiously diverse cultures; has evolved with the various traditions, approaches to scriptural authority and interpretation, methodologies of theological reflection, and cultural moralities; and incorporates the advances in intellectual, ethical, spiritual, and psychological disciplines from around the world.

Christianity has been nothing if not adaptive. The United Methodist construct of the Wesleyan quadrilateral offers an excellent lens through which we have lived faithfully through massive changes – we are defined by a deep reverence for the authority of scripture and rigorous Biblical scholarship, a commitment to maintaining a tradition grounded in the life-transforming grace of God, the vast varieties of ways we experience God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the divine in our lives, and the application of the highest forms of reason and rational thinking to discerning and doing the will of God.

When we apply the highest standards of research, study, and understanding to our scripture and theology, we express the finest example of loving God and neighbor. We strive to love the world as God so loves the world, and we come to faith through union with Christ in Christian community.

The brilliance of United Methodism is its rejection of simplistic legalism and its grounding in God’s grace. United Methodists focus less on what we have been saved from, and more on what we have been saved for. We are not a sin-defined people of faith, but a grace-forgiven people of faith, transformed by the Spirit to be the incarnate Body of Christ for the world.

United Methodists acknowledge the power of sin to separate us from God’s grace and to undermine the vision for loving community in Christ, but we do not reduce the concept to “sins” as defined by a set of unacceptable behaviors. Everyone sins, because all exist in the broken condition of sin. This is why we proclaim Jesus Christ as Savior – all sin and fall short of the glory of God. Sin – and less importantly, sins – do not define us. Faith in Christ, our baptism, our confession, our

fellowship – these things define us. United Methodists do not judge based on behaviors and biases; we extend the grace of God to all and allow the judgment to belong to God alone. The beauty of true Methodism is the core belief that there is a place at God’s table for all God’s children.

Significant factors in the current divisions within The United Methodist Church are disagreement over who belongs in the church and who doesn’t; who is qualified to lead and who isn’t; when we acquiesce to cultural norms and when we refuse (e.g., gay marriage); and the authority of scripture and what constitutes appropriate Biblical interpretation. These issues have been with us from our very beginning. Our ancestral sects and denominations have pondered schism and split over race, gender, slavery, borrowing and lending at interest, civil rights, just war – and in every case, our Hebrew and Christian scriptures have been used as both tool and weapon to defend the various positions. Those who truly reverence the Holy Word refuse to abuse it by picking and choosing discrete passages with which to make (and win) an argument; instead they treat the scriptures as a whole – a rich tapestry that reflects the complexity and diversity inherent in any community or society. In every age, the issues that have divided us have been less important than how we have chosen to address and navigate them.

The current divisions over human sexuality illustrate the propensity of our denomination to seek simple answers to complex problems. United Methodists have been seeking an “either/or” answer – do we accept LGBTQ+ people or not – to a richly textured, “both/and” reality. Our Bible makes it clear that a segment of people have always been drawn to others of same gender and that not all people are at

peace with the way they come into the world. But understanding what the Bible means by defining this truth – as it does with hundreds of other realities – as sin is not as simple as some would like to make it.

Some people today want to accept a very, simple, direct reading – homosexuality is a sin – without nuance, context, or any exploration of original meaning. Modern English translations use the word “homosexuality” as it has come to be understood in post-Enlightenment, Puritan/Victorian terms as first and foremost about the sexual act, and many want to look no further. Other people look to the place and time when these ideas were first formulated, understanding that the “sin” of homosexuality had nothing to do with the carnal act, but that it violated the community code based in God’s commandment to be fruitful and multiply, so that God could make of them a great nation and people. Others look to the New Testament with the understanding that Paul was trying to address the Greek dualism that preferences the worldly/earthly to the sacred and the divine. Most of the scholarly interpretations of the passages referring to “homosexuality” (which term never occurs in the Bible) acknowledge that these are premodern/primitive understandings of a code of conduct that ignored the common good in favor of individual and personal pleasures (with no value added to the community). Sex, as we are fixated in the modern world, was not a concern when the Hebrew and Christian scriptures were created. A problem we face today is an unwillingness to engage one another at a deep theological and scholarly rigorous level.

As long as we debate “issues” in our church using scripture as a weapon to win an argument, we will continue to see such problems emerge. The key to a vital and sustainable future must begin with an

acknowledgement that there are no simple answers to the beautiful, God-given complexity of our human community. We must respect our Holy scriptures and apply our best thinking, reasoning, and scholarship to their reading and interpretation. We must honor the integrity of the whole, and not select the parts that support our worldview and position.

It is our baptismal call to extend God's grace given to us to everyone else. The limiting and destructive behaviors of judgement and condemnation must be set aside. Paul identifies our penchant for carnal pleasures as evidence of sin in Romans, but he does so to make two crucial points: all have sinned and there is no value in trying to decide whose sin is worse and judging the sin of others while ignoring our own is as much sin as the behavior we choose to judge. Faithful discipleship demands that we leave judgement to God and we give ourselves to extending God's love and grace to everyone we can. It is inconceivable that faithful United Methodists would want to compromise the integrity of our faith by fixating on one issue some determine to be an un-forgivable sin.

Our history teaches us the folly of spending too much time debating orthodoxy and heresy. What one generation accepts – slavery, oppression of women, child abuse disguised as discipline, polygamy, rape and pillage as the right of God's people – another comes to reject as ungodly and unacceptable. What one generation rejects – meat and dairy cooked together, working on the Sabbath, divorce, women's leadership, borrowing and lending at interest – other generations understand to be remnants of an earlier, less enlightened age and culture. It has been an ongoing struggle to let go of the hegemony of Law to accept the freedom of Grace. The lesson has been

taught, learned, and forgotten again and again – our primary work together is to “work out our own salvation (plural) with fear and trembling,” to discern what is the will of God – for us all.

A faithful United Methodist is a clear admission of who we are and who we are not. We are not perfect, though God is perfecting us in love. We are not of one heart and mind, though we are one body in Christ. We will never agree in things both big and small, but we can unite in ways that make us greater than the sum of our parts. There will always be things over which we disagree, but they are never as important as the things we hold in common. We cannot revoke baptism because we disagree with the way a life turns out, but we can always promote a vision for unconditional love in the face of weakness, brokenness, and struggle that our God-given baptism provides.

The spirit of unity in Christ does not provide for winners and losers; it is a grace margin that allows us to be who we are without judging others. It allows us to follow our own conscience and to form community with like-minded, like-spirited sisters and brothers. It creates a unity around essentials, while offering a charity around our differences. It provides us with enough separation and space to navigate our differences with basic respect and regard for each other. It is grounded in the Great Commandment to love God first and foremost (respecting others who love God differently) and it allows us to love our neighbor as ourselves, even when our neighbor challenges our beliefs and sensibilities. Our church must embrace and embody the truth that God is not finished with us yet, that life in Christ is a dynamic, vibrant, and evolving relationship, and that the Holy Spirit is still teaching, guiding, challenging, and expanding our ability to witness to love, joy, justice, mercy, and grace in the world.

I would encourage United Methodists everywhere to spend time reading, studying, and reflecting on Paul's letter to the Romans. It encompasses, I believe, the message we most need to hear as we plan for the future of our denomination. We are challenged not to conform to the status quo, but to be open to transformation. We are called to work together for peace, for unity, for reconciliation and healing. We are called to leave judging to God, which frees us to engage in work that offers light, and life, and hope. We are given permission to forgive ourselves and each other so that we might recognize our place in the body of Christ while celebrating the place every other person occupies as well. Our differences are important, but not nearly as important as our call to be Christ together for the world.

And so, I support the church, in beloved community of "open hearts, open minds and open doors," because it allows me to be the bishop God has called me to be. I am bishop of grace. I am bishop of God's love for all people. I am bishop for hope. I am bishop for a redeemed creation that welcomes and receives all. I am bishop to all people in all places at all times. This is an honor and this is a trust. I love my God. I love my church. I love the creation that God so loves that God sends his only Son. I want there to be a future for all of us, where love and joy and peace and grace prevails. Pray for God's will and guidance. Pray for the Holy Spirit's revelation and support. Read and study God's word with the utmost integrity and rigor. Engage in honest and respectful Christian Conference with brothers and sisters. And open your heart and mind to the millions of people who need the love and forgiveness of God in their lives. Let us plan to be Christ Church together, honoring and glorifying God in all we say and do, for years to come.

God is not finished with us yet. God has great plans for us. I strongly believe that God's church is an inclusive church, and all are precious and beloved. Let us work hard to discern and do God's will together whenever and wherever we can. Sisters and brothers, the greatest gift God ever gave us is God's own Son, Jesus the Christ. But the second greatest gift God gave us is each other. Please, let us honor this gift and work as hard as we can to allow the Holy Spirit to make us "one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world."