

**COUNCIL OF BISHOPS
THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

**President's Address
May 1, 2017**

LET NOT THE GRACE OF GOD BE WASTED

Greetings

Grace and peace to you from Christ, our Lord, who is among us Risen and victorious.

Dear friends and colleagues, welcome to this Spring meeting of the Council of Bishops as we seek to maintain and model the unity of The United Methodist Church in the bond of peace and for the sake of God's mission in the world.

We delight in the election of five new bishops of the church since we last met and the re-election of Bishops Francisco, Juan and Torio from the Philippines and Bishop Unda from East Congo. I invite our five newly elected bishops, Bishops Mande, Owan, Lunge, Quire and Rückert to stand so that we might welcome and offer them the Peace of Christ.

Introduction

There is no escaping or minimizing the reality that this Council gathers in the wake of the Judicial Council's very recent decision regarding the election of Karen Oliveto as a Bishop of the church. Many of the reactions and responses have been swift, predictable and reflective of the deep division in our Connection over the matter of homosexuality, the interpretation of Scripture and conceptions of holiness. Others have pointed to the conciliar and holy conferencing work taking place in and through the Commission on a Way Forward and have called for renewed patience, attention and prayer for that process.

I worked closely with the officers of the Council and with the able assistance of Maidstone Mulenga and Diane Degan to immediately forward a statement to the church on behalf of the Council. I trust it reflected the intent and spirit of this Council to lead the entire United Methodist Church through this immediate moment to the consideration of a way forward at a special session of the General Conference on February 23-26, 2019 in St. Louis, Missouri.

But, one statement is far from sufficient and certainly does not release us, as the spiritual and temporal leaders of the church, from fully embracing the role and responsibility the 2016 General Conference

asked us to fulfill. I remind you at that moment we made the following statements to the General Conference and the Church:

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 will coordinate this work with the various efforts already underway to develop global structures and a new *General Book of Discipline* for our church....

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.

This is the course we have charted. The entire church is rightly watching how we will lead in this moment and as we go forward. Most of the elements of this Council meeting are intended to equip us to lead with purpose, grace and unity. I am privileged and honored, as your current president, to offer several reflections to this end. I begin with the Easter narrative.

Take Hold of Jesus' Feet

As Easter People, we know how the story ends; we know that in the end God wins; we know that Christ conquers sin and death. For us, it is natural and reassuring to experience Christ's resurrection as an explosive carnival of hope and joy. For indeed, it is! And, every Sunday is re-affirmation of this eternal truth.

But, for Mary and the other Mary, who went to Jesus' tomb on that first Easter – not so much! Matthew's gospel (Chapter 28:1-9) tells us they were filled with fear, disbelief, and astonishment. And, why not? Their world had been turned upside down. Their beloved teacher and Messiah had been crucified and buried.

They no sooner arrive at the tomb and there is an earthquake. An angel, who looks like lightning, comes and effortlessly rolls away a huge stone to reveal an empty tomb. It doesn't appear to be a very safe place. No carnival of hope and joy here. Just fear, bewilderment, confusion, dejection. Who among us isn't afraid and bewildered when our world has just been turned upside down or when we are confronted by things that do not affirm or re-enforce our beliefs, preferences or understanding of reality?

Unsafe, afraid, bewildered, confusion, disbelief, dejected, disillusioned – are these not many of the words you are hearing our people speak, or the feelings they are expressing in these anxious days?

As the frightened woman left the empty tomb, running to tell the other disciples what they had witnessed, the risen Jesus suddenly appears and greets them. And, what do they do? What do they do?

They take hold of Jesus' feet and worship him. In their bewilderment, fear, and confusion, they fall on their knees, grab Jesus' feet and hold on for dear life. They want to know Jesus is real. They want to touch him. They need to feel him. They need something to grab hold of. They need to feel safe. They want to know that Jesus is truly resurrected.

They are trying to get a grip on reality – a new reality. The reality of the Risen Christ.

Friends, Christ has escaped the tomb and seeks to encounter you and me, and the people called Methodist, in the midst of our confusion, fear and earthquakes. Our first response – our continuous first response – must be to take hold of Jesus' feet, worship him and never, never let go.

Immediately following the report from the Commission on a Way Forward tomorrow morning, we will be invited into a season of prayer led by our Council Work and Life Team. We will be invited to take hold of Jesus' feet.

Colleagues, above all else, I believe, we are compelled to remind our people that the only way to get a grip on any fear, disillusionment, despair and anger we are experiencing in our life together is to take hold of the feet of the Risen Christ and pray, pray, pray that we might be open to the new thing, the new reality, the breakthrough, that may be in God's mind.

The Essential Unifying Power

Several months ago, Bishop Ken Carter, our president-elect and one of the three bishops who serve as the moderators of the Commission on a Way Forward, wrote a profoundly insightful article reflecting on Yuval Levin's book, *The Fractured Republic*. Levin, writing about the cultural, political and economic environment in the United States, addresses the danger of polarization and division. He points to the tension between maximizing people's freedom and dreams while still maintaining the essential unifying power and principles of the American Dream. Levin claims our work is to maximize the promise while minimizing the danger. Bishop Carter, deftly points out the parallels between Levin's analysis and the current struggles of The United Methodist Church.

At this point, I quote from Bishop Carter's reflections. "It seems our promise (as The United Methodist Church) is to allow for as much differentiation as possible in a global and democratic church. This becomes necessary when you exist in Monrovia, Liberia and Birmingham, Alabama; in Portland, Oregon and in Manila, Philippines. At a congregational level, we allow for this differentiation: a church can choose to highlight or hide the name "United Methodist"; it can baptize infants in one-parent households, perform marriages for couples where one person has been previously married, contribute to mission work

that is ecumenical or non-denominational, shape worship around the lectionary or not, and the list goes on. We call this, in Levin's language, 'diversity and choice.'"

Bishop Carter continue by stating, "Our danger is, of course, that we become more diffuse and fragmented, less clear about purpose, increasingly unable to account for the reasons that we might continue to be united. The seeds of this are present in our differentiation, when such differentiation is not articulated in missional, pastoral or theological ways."

The ultimate question Levin poses is our current reality as a United Methodist Church. How do we maximize the promise of differentiation, diversity and choice for the sake of missional effectiveness and impact while minimizing the danger of increasing polarization and ultimately division? A related question, perhaps the key question for the UMC, is: What is the essential unifying power that holds us together or that serves as the sinew to maintain the tension between differentiation and division.

(PowerPoint graphic)

Historically, the essential unifying power has been a unique Wesleyan interaction between our connectional activities, structures, missions, and relationships and our core orthodox doctrine, apostolic faith and Articles of Religion. Our current expressions of this interaction have too often become politicized and cast in terms of institutional preservation or doctrinal preservation. And, we have begun to count the costs of losing one or the other or both.

Let's be clear, if we divide, nearly all our essential unifying institutional activities would be lost or severely diminished – our ecumenical agreements, educational processes and institutions, prophetic statements, mission initiatives, global mission partnerships, communication plans, discipleship resources, benefit programs, publications, and the relationships among those who do this work. I don't even know how to begin to assess this cost! On the other hand, a division could also compromise and impoverish our dynamic biblical, Wesleyan faith and devotional practice. What is the cost to our souls and witness if in the name of theological or doctrinal preservation we violate our own General Rules of doing no harm, doing all the good we can and staying in love with God? And I would add, staying in love with our neighbor.

We would do well to remember that for Wesley, the Methodist Connection was not about either institutional propagation or Confessional purity. In the early days of the Methodist movement, the Connection was a dynamic confluence of spiritual community and evangelistic or missional strategy. It was designed as a revival movement to “call people out of darkness into Christ’s marvelous light” (I Peter 2:9), to spread scriptural holiness, and to transform lives.

Bishop Carter strikes a similar tone in this article. “Our foremost challenge is in naming the positive good at the heart of our (Methodist Movement) – we believe that followers of Jesus, in the Wesleyan tradition in general, but in The United Methodist Church more particularly, can work together to make disciples for the transformation of the world. We do this in many different ways – this is diversity and choice. But we must do the work in a much clearer and collaborative way. Polarization and division – that is, aligning and protecting ourselves in our self-selected tribes of homogeneous belief – are the greatest threats to both the genius, vitality and impact of our Connection.

Who's Going to Roll the Stone Away?

I return to the First Easter morning narrative. This time from Mark's account of Jesus' resurrection.

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint Jesus' dead body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb. ³They were saying to each other, "Who's going to roll the stone away from the entrance for us?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away.

(And it was a very large stone!) Mark 16:1-4 (CEB)

From the beginning of the Methodist movement, we have been in the stone-rolling business. From the beginning of the Methodist movement we have gone to and heard and responded to broken people, defeated people, marginalized people, hopeless people, forgotten people who are crying out, "Who's going to roll the stone away?" From the beginning of the Methodist movement, we have gone to every corner of the globe to proclaim the promise of Easter: In Christ, the stones of your life can be rolled away and you can be set free. We have proclaimed that Christ's

victory over sin and death is every person's victory. We have called the names of our neighbors and the sojourners among us and invited them to move from the ground of the dead to the place of the living. We have unbound grave clothes and set people free to go and tell others about Jesus' saving grace. We have equipped God's people to join Jesus' "roll the stone away" mission.

It is this stone-rolling, unbinding-the-grave-clothes DNA that has been and continues to be the essential unifying power of the Methodist movement. This stone-rolling DNA is born of our orthodox theology, fueled by our evangelical zeal, unleashed by our movemental nimbleness, and given incarnational expression through our expansive missional activities.

Apart from the specific matter of homosexuality, we need to find our way forward in recreating the dynamic, grace-infused, movemental culture of diverse, contextual, adaptive expressions of our mission. Nimbleness has always been the strategic genius of the Wesleyan movement.

- going to the people;
- making ministry contextual;
- affirming diversity and differentiation, not just as values, but as missional strategy;
- adapting structures and ministry delivery systems;
- encouraging fresh expressions of ministry;
- inviting risk-taking;
- celebrating innovation;
- raising up Wesleyan entrepreneurs.

For the past two quadrennia, our framework for living into this roll-the-stone-away mission has been to increase the number of vital United Methodist congregations around the globe engaged in four key areas of missional focus: Leadership Development, Global Health, Ministry with the Poor, New Places for New People.

(PowerPoint Slides)



- We have been **developing principled Christian leaders** and are currently committed to engaging 3 million people in world-transforming activities.

- We have been **creating new places for new people and revitalizing existing congregations** and are currently committed to forming 1 million new disciples of Jesus Christ.
- We have been **engaging in ministry with the poor** and are currently committed to transforming 400 communities for vital, abundant living.
- We have been **improving health globally**, and are currently committed to reaching 1 million children with life-saving health interventions.

And, these specific strategies and objectives are only the tip of the iceberg of our stone-rolling mission. We are also on the front-lines with immigration reform and welcoming of refugees, eliminating HIV/AIDS, combatting racism, tribalism, sexism and homophobia. Thousands of congregations, on four continents, and scores of annual and central conferences are daily rolling the stone away for individuals and communities to experience the hope and joy of new, abundant resurrected life.

The breadth and depth and vitality and impact of our stone-rolling mission around the globe is truly astonishing! It cannot be fully catalogued or articulated. But it does provide the essential unifying

power for our movement. Not because it looks the same in every place or is uniformly designed and implemented. But, because in every diverse context where we have been sent by God, it offers, fulfills, and expresses the first proclamation: “Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 NRSV) The stone has been rolled away!

My heart breaks, as a bishop of the whole church, and particularly in this role as president of the Council, when I see our stone-rolling mission at risk. So much of our identity, impact, witness and collegiality would be fractured if we fail to reclaim, and where necessary, reform, that which unifies us.

On behalf of this Council and the entire church, I express deep gratitude to the Council’s Commission on a Way Forward, and in particular our moderator team: Bishops Carter, Steiner-Ball and Yemba. They are engaged in this very task of reclaiming our core unifying power and reforming our contextual expression of our stone-rolling mission. I remind you of the vision that beckons and guides the Commission’s holy conferencing.

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.

The Final Exam

In the midst of our debate and disruption, in the midst of our seeking ways to maximize missional nimbleness while minimizing the danger of division, I urge this Council of Bishops to remember and affirm that life in the church goes on; ministry has not stopped. I urge us to remember and affirm that we have more common ground than discord. I urge us to remember and affirm “that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Above all, I urge us to find our common moral and prophetic voice. We must attend to our own household and we are doing that through the Commission and the called General Conference. But, Jesus calls us to attend to the entire household of God. He laid down the pathway and the markers in his own inauguration address:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's
favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

And, there is no question about the outcomes Jesus is looking for. This is the final exam.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at

his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' (Matthew 25:31-36)

Colleagues, if there was ever a time for this Council to speak to the nations with clarion voice, with righteous judgment, with a call to repent and give one's heart to God, it is now. The world lives in terror. Civility has disintegrated. The rich enrich themselves. People feel used, neglected, angry. Millions have become refugees from genocide, famine, economic exploitation. Presidents and generals and dictators make war. LGBTQ youth commit suicide. Half the world lacks basic sanitation and/or access to clean water. Gun violence is rampant. Millions of primary age children are not in school due to poverty, war or neglect. Nationalism and protectionism prevail. Fear and prejudice and racism rule the day. Morality and fidelity are passé.

Jesus' judgment falls hard on me. I have seen many hungry people, but felt no pain in my stomach. I have seen the sick and homeless on the streets of Port-au-Prince, but I slept in a comfortable bed. I have seen the children living on the city dump in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where they gather scraps of plastic and glass for recycling, but I enjoyed a delicious dinner. I have seen children dying from malaria in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, while I took my expensive anti-malaria medication. I have seen refugees in downtown Minneapolis seeking freedom and safety, but I returned to the security of my suburban neighborhood. I have encountered those hungering for abundant life, but I rushed off to the next meeting. I have watched the unchecked expressions of racism on the streets of our major US cities and the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, but failed to boldly proclaim that all lives matter: Black lives matter; Native American lives matter; Muslim lives matter; LGBTQ lives matter; children's lives matter; the sin-sick lives matter.

The words of Proverbs 31 rise in my soul and ring in my ears:

Speak out for those who cannot speak,

for the rights of all the destitute.

Speak out, judge righteously,

defend the rights of the poor and needy. (Proverbs 31:8-9)

Friends, I urge us to be diligent and prayerful in attending to the fear in our own household, but let us not forget that Jesus calls us to attend to the fear that grips the entire household of God. Bishop Skeete reminds us as he preached Bishop May's memorial that we are to call the world to "look beyond our fears; if we are to live beyond them."

I urge us to prayerfully and tenderly minister to the distress in our own United Methodist household, but re-claim today that the distress of every single human being is a priority for the living God. If we fail to comprehend this central truth of the Law, the prophets and of Jesus, we fail in all.

The world is the Lord's and all that is in it! Do you believe it? If you do, say it with me: The world is the Lord's and all that is in it! Again, like you mean it: The world is the Lord's and all that is in it! God hates nothing that God has wondrously made. We are all God's children sharing this world with all its resources. We are all loved by the same living God, fully revealed in Christ Jesus. Jesus didn't own a house. He was marginalized, suffered and died. But through his extravagant, sacrificial love, he conquered all evil powers of this world, including the sin of thinking we are better than the tribe next door. Jesus built the

first bridge out of death, depravity, disdain and division with only three nails and two pieces of wood shaped into an old rugged cross.

I am not worried about God doing God's work. Believing that God is doing God's work in Christ is not the final exam. The final exam is whether you and I will fully, sacrificially, extravagantly engage in Christ's mission to transform the world. The final exam is our response to human need and suffering and injustice in our lifetime. The final exam is not professed beliefs. The final exam is our redemptive, life-giving, soul-liberating actions. The final exam is loving unconditionally, as God loves. The final exam is embracing the stone-rolling business.

Jesus is brutally clear that in the end when the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the nations are gathered before him, the final exam question will not be about what we professed but what we did when we saw the least of these hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, sick or in prison. Love and mercy, truth and grace are the standards by which you and I will be judged. God is doing God's work in Christ. And so should we.

Go To Galilee

I return to the Easter narrative from Mark's gospel:

Going into the tomb, they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right side; and they were startled. But he said to them, "Don't be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He isn't here. Look, here's the place where they laid him. Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you." (Mark 16:5-7)

Roll the stone away! Do not be afraid! Take hold of Jesus' feet! Go to Galilee!

It is time for us to go to Galilee. Jesus goes ahead of us. We will see the Risen Christ there. He will bring us peace and teach us to love his sheep.

It is time for us to be together in community, a praying community, a discerning community. It is time to fully embrace these fifty great days of Easter and await the coming of the Holy Spirit – the Spirit that makes

it possible for us to hear one another, to understand one another, to appreciate and respect one another, to know the unity of the Spirit.

Pentecost doesn't come until people are gathered from every tribe. Pentecost doesn't come until the people gathered from every tribe are depending on God and God alone to show them the way forward.

The Commission on a Way Forward is a representative gathering of the people from every tribe. They have gone to Galilee. They are encountering the Risen Christ. They are breaking bread together. They are studying the scriptures. They are reflecting honestly about their convictions and experiences. They are listening intently to each other's hopes and longings. They are discerning God's preferred future for our church. They are waiting and watching for the Holy Spirit breakthroughs that will show them and all of us the way.

I respectfully, but vigorously, urge this Council and the entire Church to stay focused on the Commission's work as our best opportunity to determine God's leading for our church. Let us determine to go to Galilee with them, and then on to Jerusalem and then into Pentecost.

Let us determine not to abdicate our role, our privilege, our responsibility as “shepherds of souls” to lead the church in prayerful, expectant waiting, in casting out fear, in trusting fully in God’s faithfulness. Let us demonstrate and proclaim that only by practicing the same self-emptying obedience Jesus did can we experience true Easter liberty.

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.”

Let not the grace of God be wasted. That is my prayer for our beloved church today. That is my prayer for our witness to the world. Let not the grace of God be wasted! May it be so.

**Bishop Bruce R. Ough, President
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