



Council of Bishops

The United Methodist Church



The Book of Discipline as a “Revelation of the Holy Spirit”: A Sacred Mission, Our Theological Task and A Way Forward

Remarks from Bishop Cynthia Harvey and Bishop Ken Carter
to the Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church on October 23, 2018.*

Bishop Cynthia Harvey:

The question before us is in response to the request made by the delegates of the 2016 General Conference for the bishops to lead the church past an impasse it has faced for almost 50 years on human sexuality.

As you know the bishops responded, formed a 32-member commission who in collaboration with the bishops crafted the report and the petitions that are before us today. The Commission and the bishops developed the Vision, Mission and Scope that guided their every step in the process of their work. Three particular points were crucial to their work and kept them focused on what the General Conference asked of the bishops.

- To maximize the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places as possible.
- Allow for as much contextual differentiation as possible; and
- To design a way forward that balances an approach to different theological understandings of human sexuality with a desire for as much unity as possible.

Although the Council of Bishops has recommended the adoption of the One Church Plan, the Council of Bishops seeks to assist the Judicial Council in identifying issues in each of the petitions in a fair and balanced manner so the Judicial Council will be in a position to fully analyze and address the constitutionality of all three plans.

The church needs clear and cogent guidance from you regarding the constitutionality in advance of the limited three-day gathering in St. Louis.

This could very well be the most important decision we will ever make. It has been the desire of the Council of Bishops to do everything we can to clear the way for the delegates to do their best work.

We are here, I believe for that reason and perhaps that reason alone – to help the delegates do their best work.

The Council of Bishops has spent countless hours in prayer and discernment. I wish I could share video and photographs of bishops on their knees in prayer, bishops hand in hand with tears streaming down their faces at tables as they heard one another’s stories.

Friends, the Council of Bishops understands the crucial nature of this work and seeks to remain faithful to what the General Conference asked of us – to seek the unity of this church we all love. Not the uniformity but the unity.

The bishops support of the One Church Plan illustrates its faithfulness to the plea for unity. It is the plan that is most closely in harmony with not only what the General Conference asked of us but also the vision, mission and scope.

I will remind us of a very important three letter word in the Nature of Our Theological Task – AND –

Our theological task is both critical AND constructive

Our theological task is both individual AND communal

Our theological task is contextual AND incarnational

Finally, our theological task is essential AND practical.

We are not the ones at stake here – those who are yet to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ are the ones at stake. I am not worried about God doing God's work. Will we do ours?

Bishop Ken Carter:

I want to reflect on BOD paragraphs 102 (Our Doctrinal Heritage), 105 (Our Theological Task) and 125 (Mission and Ministry of the Church), with a few comments added. Our doctrinal standards do not speak marriage, human sexuality, or gender, leaving that as a task of interpretation.

Faced with diverse interpretations of the apostolic message, leaders of the early church sought to specify the core of Christian belief in the canon of scripture and the creeds (102). Nourished by these common roots of a shared Christian heritage, the branches of Christ's Church have developed diverse traditions that enlarge our store of shared understandings (102).

It is true that what some see as a strength—diversity—others view as a problem—our lack of uniformity. That we find ourselves here is the result of our being a denomination of twelve million plus persons on four continents. But the struggle could be just the same if we were one ethnic group in one geographical location. Within the nations represented here we have sharp divisions, and some of these divisions have nothing to do with religion.

We are a church that is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. We praise God for the fruit of God's mission, even as we acknowledge the sins of colonialism and empire that have been attached to our human efforts. We have much to teach each other, and, as the

hymn reminds us, new occasions teach new duties. Our duty in the present moment is to remain one body in Christ, with a diversity of gifts, with differences that are real, and amidst the harm we have done to each other. And yet our most profound identity is located in our baptisms, which we trace to someone's faithfulness to the great commission (Matthew 28), which along with the great commandment (Mark 12) would become the scriptural motivations for our mission statement, to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world (121).

Methodism did not arise as a response to a doctrinal dispute (102), although there were and are theological controversies. Wesley's normative response is found in his concept of the Catholic spirit, where he speaks of orthodoxy, at best, as a slender part of religion. The task of Methodists was not to reformulate doctrine, but to call people to experience the justifying and sanctifying grace of God (102). This was and is our missional evangelism. Wesley's orientation was thus practical—doctrine serves discipleship (102).

While the church considers its doctrinal affirmations a central feature of its identity, the Church encourages serious reflection across the theological spectrum (105). Our theological task is constructive (thinking afresh), contextual (the incarnation is in a time and place) and "essentially practical" (our daily lives) (105).

Of crucial importance are concerns generated by great human struggles for dignity, liberation and fulfillment—aspirations that are inherent elements in God's design for creation (105). This has implications for divorce, remarriage, celibacy and same gender relationships. Some speak of this as confusion, others as complexity. Both may be correct! God has not given us the luxury to live in a simple time with a simple faith. God has given us Jesus Christ, whom we encounter as Lord and Savior, our judge and our hope.

In the name of Jesus Christ, we are called to work within our diversity while exercising patience and forbearance with one another, an echo of Ephesians 4. Such patience stems neither from indifference toward truth nor from an indulgent tolerance of error but from an awareness that we know only in part, an echo of 1 Corinthians 13, and that none of us is able to search the mysteries of God except by the spirit of God. We proceed with our theological task, trusting that the Spirit will grant us wisdom to continue our journey with the whole people of God (105).

The alternative is to walk apart, or to remain where we are. To walk apart is schism. To remain where we are is to forget that we are a movement of grace and holiness, not static but dynamic. At our best we are walking in the light of God and we are walking together. United Methodists are bound together by a connectional covenant, integrally holding connectional unity and local freedom (125), proclaiming and embodying the gospel in our cultural and social contexts.

Doctrine arises out of the life of the church, its faith, its worship, its *Discipline*, its conflicts, its challenges from the world it would serve (105). The One Church Plan removes recent and modern language about homosexuality that is 46 years old. It honors and protects traditional conscience. And it helps us to remain in connection for the sake of the mission with those who are not yet a part of any church, who have not yet become a part of the promise of Philippians 2, when “every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

These three paragraphs (102, 105, 125) are crucial to the way forward: our doctrinal heritage and its relation to our theological task, and how each serves the mission of the church.

Bishop Ken Carter

We are not here to argue against any of the three plans but rather to reflect on each of them with you to help the delegates do their work, so that all three plans can be rightfully considered by the General Conference.

Some have suggested that the traditionalist plan maintains the status quo with respect to human sexuality. This is not accurate. The traditionalist Plan organizes our church around one issue— human sexuality. Some may suggest the issue is biblical interpretation, but the recurring legislative focus on the certification of uniformity of thought and practice related to human sexuality defines this plan.

The traditional plan increases the length of the *Book of Discipline* and its complexity. It diverts our attention and resources to legal processes. By an excessive focus on law, it takes our attention away from mission.

This is not church law; it is a way of discipleship (102). The law came through Moses, John announces in the first chapter of his gospel; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Truth is not a concept to be pitted against grace—at least this is not its purpose in the scriptures. John is calling us to see the law through the lens of grace in the incarnation of Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life.

I am a traditionalist in my faith.

The strength of traditionalist faith is that it teaches us to be disciples. The weakness of traditionalist faith is that it separates law, grace and truth. They are one. But only grace saves us. Who is in a position to condemn, scripture asks us? If you would mark our iniquities, who could stand, the scripture asks us? The answer: None of us.

The traditional plan lodges the conflict in the annual conference, which is the basic body of the church (33). It forces every Annual Conference to define itself in relation to one issue, human sexuality, a topic about which there are very different opinions. This is not the cross and the flame!

Which leads me to a question: Is the creation of pathways that require Annual Conferences to vote a first step in dissolving the United Church, which we understand some groups have proposed?

Bishop Cynthia Harvey

You have now heard all three plans. I remind us again that our work today is to help the delegates do their best work. We do not want a repeat of Tampa 2012!

I believe I can safely say that we are all asking you to help make these plans better. To throw any of them out in total would be deciding for the delegates – who are the ones to whom the legislative work is delegated. The delegates need to have legislative authority in order to do their best work.

And our best work must answer the question WHY? The WHY of the Council's support of the One Church Plan is about the mission of the church. In Louisiana we say that we hold nothing sacred but the mission.

We have said that the One Church Plan is the best instrument we have for the church to make a way forward that is most in harmony with what the 2016 delegates asked us to do which is true.

I have said that what's at stake are those who are yet to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ – which is true.

What I have not said and I wish not to be lost is that our support of mission around the world is at stake. As parts of the church begin to fracture, I believe our mission will also begin to fracture.

I have witnessed miles of women in Africa with babies strapped to their back waiting in the hot sun for a mosquito net or a measles vaccine. That's at risk.

I have watched young women and men pumping fresh water out of wells in Kamina, Lumumbashi and many other places. That's at risk.

I have witnessed children's lives saved at Ganta Hospital in Liberia. That's at risk.

I have seen the work of tireless nurses and doctors at Dabou Hospital in Cote d'Ivoire making sure babies are born alive. That's at risk!

I have rocked babies at the orphanage in Old Mutare in Zimbabwe. That's at risk!

I have witnessed the flood waters from Monsoons in the Philippines and families fleeing for their lives.

I have experienced flood waters rise in my own town of Baton Rouge in 2016 when 6 trillion gallons of waters filled our bayous and streets in a matter of hours and in my hometown of Houston last year after Hurricane Harvey.

I have been to the Sager Brown Depot where 18 wheelers of supplies pull out of the parking lot almost every day.

Friends, this is at risk in a fractured body.

Often, I am asked, “why the One Church Plan?” and yes, it is for all the reasons having to do with human sexuality and as important as that is – there is more!

A fracture to the unity of this body will fracture the mission of the church.

We must decide – do we hold nothing sacred but the mission? Do we risk the unity of the body – the fracturing of the church we love?

I close with a reminder from our 1944 *Book of Discipline* from the Episcopal Greeting. To put this into a timetable for us – there is a war going on in the world. This General Conference comes before D-Day. It is after the establishment of The Methodist Church from the Methodist Episcopal Church, Methodist Episcopal Church South and the Methodist Protestant Church. The Southern church only agreed to the union after a compromise that created a jurisdiction based exclusively on race not geography. So, things were not perfect! The episcopal greeting is significant, I believe for us today.

Episcopal Greetings – 1944

“In such a process of adjustment, the *Discipline* became not a book of definite rules, nor yet a formal code, but rather a record of the successive stages of spiritual insight attained by Methodists under the grace of Christ. We have therefore expected that the *Discipline* would be administered, not merely as a legal document, but as a revelation of the Holy Spirit working in and through our people. We reverently insist that a fundamental aim of Methodism is to make her organization an instrument for the development of spiritual life. We do not regard the machinery as sacred in lift itself, but we do regard as very sacred the souls for whom the church lives and works. We do now express the faith and hope that the prayerful observance of the spiritual intent of the *Discipline* may be to the people called Methodists a veritable means of grace.”

May it be so. Amen.

*** The Council of Bishops requested oral hearings before the Judicial Council of The United Methodist Church regarding Docket 1018-12, the constitutionality of the three plans included in the report of the Commission on a Way Forward. Above are some of the remarks shared by Bishop Cynthia Harvey, president-designate and Bishop Ken Carter, president of the Council of Bishops.*

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