

Bishop Mike Lowry 2021 Episcopal Address to the Central Texas Conference

June 21, 2021

Way, Way Back to the Future



Envisioning a New Spring

The third [Council of Bishops](#) meeting I attended as new bishop was held in the fall of 2009 at [Bethesda, Maryland](#), just outside of [Washington D.C.](#) During the weeklong Council meeting, we took one afternoon to go and lobby Senators and Representatives at the U.S. Capitol. Along with three other active bishops serving in the State of Texas at that time, we visited [Senator John Cornyn](#)'s office. One of the bishops reported having a good personal relationship with Senator Cornyn. We were politely received by the Senator's office, but unfortunately Senator Cornyn was unavailable. Instead of having an opportunity to discuss the moral and spiritual impact of various legislative items with a senior staff member, we were herded to a corner of Cornyn's office lobby. Huddled together, a volunteer aid (college intern?) politely listened to our concerns. It was a stark contrast to the day when a Methodist bishop was greeted with deference and respect by the President of the United States.

Our brief, inconsequential and utterly irrelevant visit to Senator Cornyn's office highlighted the harsh reality that we are in a post-Christendom age. No longer does the Christian faith, and more specifically the United Methodist Church, assume a leading societal position. Only a few months earlier that year, I was in board meeting of the [Texas Methodist Foundation](#) (TMF, a leading Methodist institution and think tank). In a discussion about the future of the church, one of the clergy present at the meeting referred to our living in a post-Christian age. A respected lay member of the TMF Board, a prominent banker and very active Christian in his local United Methodist Church, interrupted, "What's this?" he asked. "Why haven't we heard about this before?" The notion that Christianity (and more specifically the United Methodist Church) had moved beyond a position of cultural influence and leadership was a new concept to him.



The ensuing discussion (which took place 12 years ago) was brightly illuminating. Most of the clergy in the room believed that the reality of living in a post-Christendom age was a well-known and obvious insight. They had read and long discussed books like [Loren Mead's *The Once and Future Church*](#) and [Stanley Hauerwas & Wil Willimon's](#)

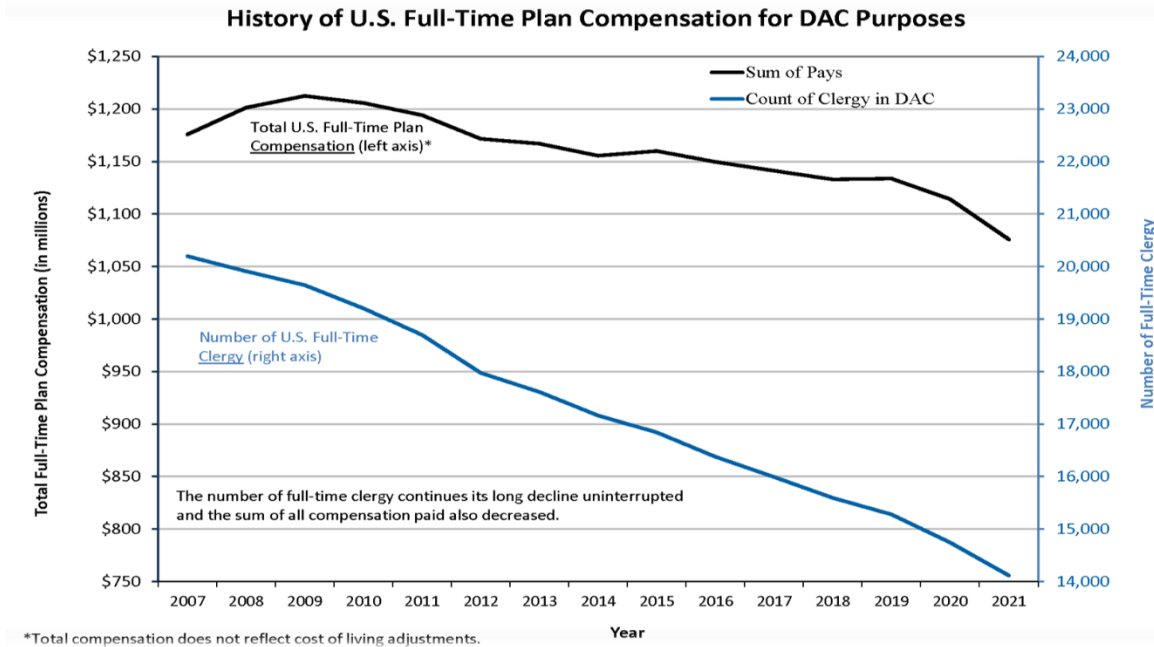
[Resident Aliens](#) which chronicled this change. Many, though in fairness not all, of the lay leaders gathered had not grappled with the depth of the change which has culturally taken place.

During my first year or so as a bishop, when I would mention that we were in a post-Christian era, clergy would tend to sigh and say, “look we already know this, that’s obvious.” To which I would respond (then and now!), “...but I don’t see you changing your behavior. Most of you are operating as if we are still living in a time of Christendom,” – i.e. a time of dominant cultural Christianity and influence. When I would make similar observations in a group laity, it almost inevitably sparked passionate discussions about whether this was an accurate or true statement. It would quickly be followed by comments related to the various issues of what we have come to call the “culture wars.”

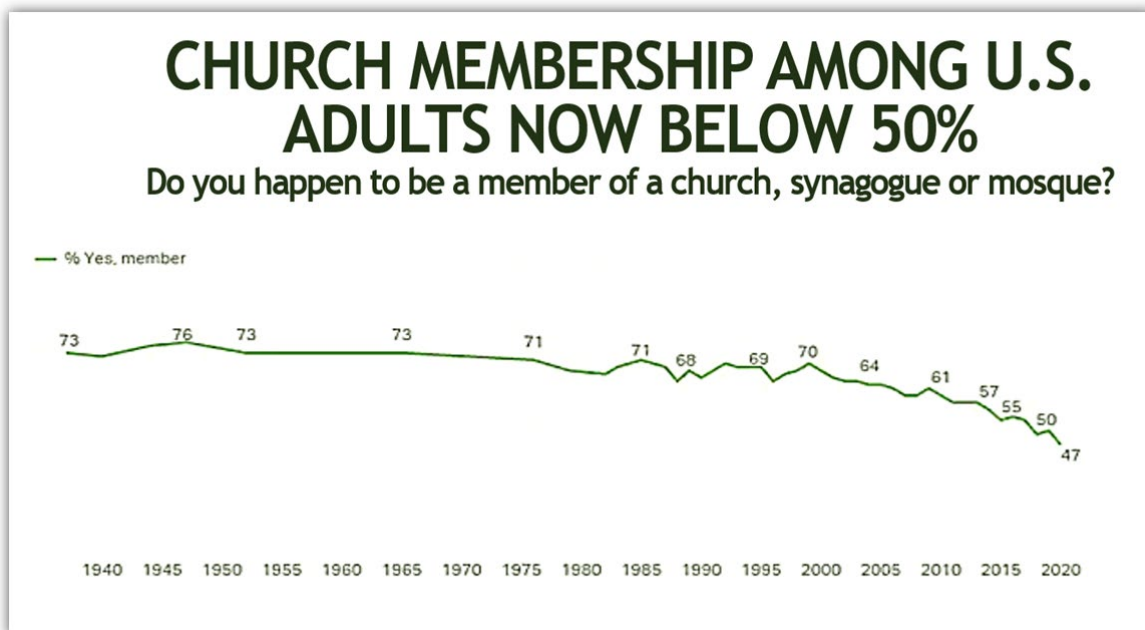
While there can be no doubt that we are still grappling with various issues of the “culture wars,” I think it is safe today to say that with most of high society, the culture wars are over. In much of American society, traditional cultural Christianity (which is very different from and should not be confused with deep disciplined orthodox Christianity!!) has largely been defeated. Put bluntly, the cultural wars are largely over, and cultural Christianity lost.

Charles Taylor’s encyclopedic [A Secular Age](#) chronicles our movement from a time in history where belief in God was a given that could be assumed to an age where the notion of a transcendent God is one option among many. Closer to earth, in the central part of the State of Texas (i.e., the geographical area of the Central Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church), those in regular worship on an average Sunday in the United Methodist Church make up approximately 1.1 percent of the population. Furthermore, in the eight states of the [South Central Jurisdiction of The United Methodist Church](#), this percentage is roughly average. One way of illustrating what has been happening over a sixty year period might come from examining the relationship between full time clergy and The UMC in America during a relatively brief period of time as illustrated in the graph below.





For a wider view, consider the graph below found in the Washington Post under the banner [“Church membership in the U.S. has fallen below the majority for the first time in nearly a century: The number of Americans who said religion was very important to them has dropped to 48 percent, a new low point in the polling since 2000.”](#)



My friends in Christ, regardless of where you see yourself and your church on the conservative to liberal (or if you prefer traditional to progressive) spectrum, none of this should be news to us. The challenge of faithfulness is what we do about this new day and culture!

The Hunger of Our Times

I believe that culturally we are engaged in our own version of the hunger games and that it is past time for the church to respond. Allow me to explain.

The running battle of over individual rights versus social responsibility is a searing sign of the moral confusion of our age and time. The phrase “spiritual but not religious” contains the false, and for Christians, heretical claim that an individual’s whims trump (pun intended) community responsibility. John Wesley insisted that “the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.”

Our squabble, demonstrated by the rise in violence on airplanes over mask wearing, exhibits a care-less attitude towards our neighbor.

A recklessly over-sexualized society demonstrates an indifference to God’s creative intent.

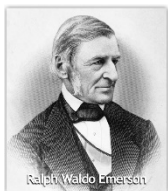
Choaking on our consumptive accumulation of things illustrates our poverty of purpose.

I could go on, but you get the drift. [Gil Rendle](#), the recently retired Senior Consultant for the Texas Methodist Foundation, has commented about our society that “we are in a moment of seismic shift.” Gil calls this an anxious time because we need to move ahead without really knowing where we are going. The good folks at TMF talk in terms of “following the North Star of purpose.”

The issue for us is who or what defines and shapes our purpose. For the faithful church of Jesus Christ, the North Star of purpose is driven by the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This is and remains our **Wildly Important Goal**, our **WIG**. But I am ahead of myself. Let us examine our own context and situation more deeply.



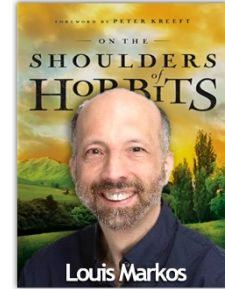
For Christians, I submit that our purpose should not be driven by our emotions, our preferences or especially whatever is considered culturally popular (regardless of whether it is progressive or traditional). It was the transcendentalist and early American philosopher [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#), himself no orthodox Christian, who said,



“There never was a strong people that did not rank subordination and discipline among the signal virtues. Subjection to moods is the mark of a deteriorating morality. There is no baser servitude than that of the man [and we would add woman] whose caprices are his [or her] masters, and a nation composed of such men [or women] could not long preserve its liberties.”

Pause here in this examination of our context. This may seem obvious, but I submit that it is not plainly apparent either in the Church or in our wider civil society. We will not navigate ourselves out of the morass we are in by the politics of either the left or the right. [Louis Markos](#)’ trenchant comment on virtue is insightful.

"We are, in many ways, a civilization adrift on the stormy seas of relativism and existentialism. The first "ism" has robbed us of any transcendent standard against which we can measure our thoughts, our words, and our deeds; the second has emptied our lives of any higher meaning, purpose, or direction. Our compass is broken and the stars obliterated, and we are left with nothing to navigate by but a vague faith in the modern triad of progress, consumerism, and egalitarianism. They are not enough." On the Shoulders of Hobbits: The Road to Virtue with Tolkien and Lewis, p. 9



There is a deep hunger in our times which is at once both counter intuitive and counter cultural. I cannot help but return once again to [Mother Teresa](#)'s comment to a reporter after delivering lectures in America. She is reported to have said, "I've never seen a people so hungry." [Kevin Watson](#) is right when he states, "We are desperate for a real Christianity, not the cheap imitation we have tolerated for far too long and tried to pervert to our own worldly advantage."

In our American version of the hunger games, signs of spiritual starvation are all around and yes, even in too many of our churches. We need more than good advice. We need good news! We need, desperately, the gospel of Jesus Christ!" The truly great news is that this is precisely what God in Christ through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit offers us. We must go back, way back to our future.

Back to the Future

I love the line from the end of the movie "Back to the Future" by Professor Brown as he tries to convince a reluctant Marty to go back and time travel with him again: "no...it's your kids." If not for our sake then at least for the next generation, let us stop this insidious dance with slow decline in the church. (As an important aside: I thank God that our emphasis on the [WIG](#) has resulted in the Central Texas Conference being one of the very few conferences in the United States showing growth in worship attendance prior to the onset of COVID-19.)

Let us go back to the heart of the gospel in its full dimension – both spiritual and social. Make no mistake, to do so will cut uncomfortably across the scared wasteland of the cultural wars tearing at every single one of us. It will call us back to our primary allegiance to Christ above and beyond political party, financial gain, racial identity and even nationality.

The cross is not a symbol of execution but a sign of victory.

The grave is not a grief-filled prison but an empty tomb of triumph.

The birth of the church in worship at Pentecost is not a gathering of polite, gentle religion but an assembly of the troops under the leadership of the Risen Lord through the Holy Spirit's power and presence saturated in praise to the glory of God.

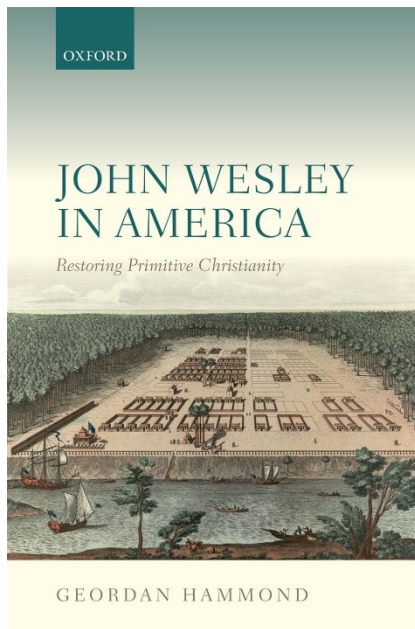


We need not fear. We have lived through the crisis of decline and massive cultural change before. Just think of the earliest Christians. There were a tiny, persecuted minority that offered a

social witness radically different from any of the competing political or social platforms of their day. They understood themselves to be **in** but **not of** the world. Thus, in what scholars think might have been a baptismal address in 2 Peter, we hear,

“Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust and may become participants of the divine nature.” (2 Peter 1:4)

A conviction of being in but not of the world was at the very heart of the Methodist movement. John Wesley was convinced that the people called Methodists were to be a recovery of what he called “primitive Christianity.” Methodist scholar [Geordan Hammond](#) concludes that Wesley



“continued to believe that primitive Christianity provided a normative model to be restored. Wesley had no doubt that the doctrine, discipline, and practice of the primitive church was embodied by the Methodist movement. For Wesley, Methodism was the restoration of primitive Christianity.” ([John Wesley in America: Restoring Primitive Christianity](#))

A crisis is an accelerator. In the slamming impact of COVID-19 and the wrenching internal church doctrinal dispute over human sexuality, we, as a church, are being given by God an opportunity to re-embrace our purpose and commission. I contend simply that we must go back to the earliest Christian movement in the Roman Empire during the first three centuries and to the early Wesleyan (or Methodist) revival of 18th century England for guidance. (If you would like a more modern example, look at what is happening to the Christian movement in China. China will be the global center of Christianity by 2050, probably sooner.)

The death of nominal Christianity or cultural Christendom is a good thing. Ironically, or more accurately providentially, the Christian church grows when persecuted and withers when awash in prosperity. I believe that we are being forced, individually and collectively, by the movement of the Holy Spirit, to confront whether we are really Christ followers or not. Put theologically and biblically, is Jesus Lord of your life and your church’s collective life or not?

Given the hunger within and around us linked to the way before us leading back to the future, how then do we move forward to a new spring in faithfulness and fruitfulness?

Forward to a New Spring

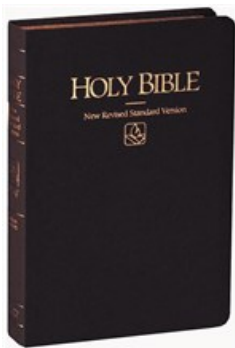
A quote from [Thom Rainer](#) in [The Post-Quarantine Church](#) outlines a way forward through the way back to the future. *“Get ready to begin the journey. From my perspective, the church is entering the most amazing and exciting days it has seen in decades—maybe even in centuries. Though the path will not always be easy, we can expect future days of great opportunity.”*

I return to a concept introduced earlier of following the North Star of purpose. The North Star of purpose is driven by the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. It is given to us by the risen Lord for the sake of this disease-stricken world. This is and remains our [Wildly Important Goal, our WIG](#). I love the way Alan Hirsch puts it in his book *The Forgotten Ways*...*“The desperate, prayer-soaked human clinging to Jesus, the reliance on his Spirit, and the distillation of the gospel message into the simple, uncluttered message of Jesus as Lord and Savior is what catalyzed the missional potencies inherent in the people of God.”* – Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways* (p.86)

Let me offer some key markers that we might employ as elements for moving forward to a new spring from the earliest Christians in the Roman empire:

- Clear Christological identity → Jesus is Lord!
- Sacrificial in service
- Wise in witness

Listen to the way the Apostle Paul put it in the opening chapter of his letter to the beloved Philippians.



“Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God’s doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.” Philippians 1:27-30

Did you catch verse 29? Dr. Clifton Howard, assistant to the Bishop, recently called it to my attention. ***“For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.”*** Did you get that!? “The privilege” of suffering for Him!

An additional key marker of faithfulness along with the three I have already mentioned was assumed by the earliest Christians and put firmly in place by the leaders of the Methodist revival. Both embraced the use of small groups for discipleship formation. The first small group was made up of 12 disciples who became the apostles - the sent ones. In the Gospel of Mark, we read, ***“He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.”*** (Mark 6:7)

Those called Methodist under first Wesley and then Asbury’s tutelage in the Americas were required to be a part of a “Class Meeting” for their own spiritual growth and discipleship training. The importance of this “marker” or “signpost” is why the Cabinet has moved small group formation to the top of the list of metrics we look at after we have first examined the narrative stories of transformation in a congregation’s discipleship life. As I have shared before, we are not asking you to do what we do not do. We, as a Cabinet, meet regularly as a Class

meeting. None of the “business” of the church is allowed. We share scripture and ask, “how is it with your soul?”

Calling Us Back to Center

Moving [Forward to a New Spring](#) necessitates a biblical and theological recovery of the Gospel. The earliest Christian witness and the Methodist revival both focused on what God was doing in and through us, not what we humans are working at. The focus was on God, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!

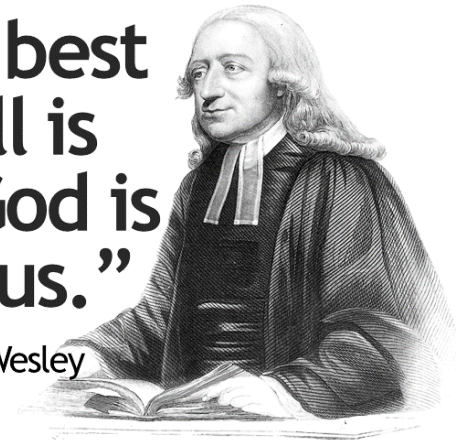
I am tired of a spiritually atrophied Unitarian United Methodism that acts as if the Holy Spirit is not real.

I have had it with a vague deistic theology which condescends to Jesus as an interesting teacher but denies his kingship.

The Lord is calling us back to the center of the Christian faith in the great doctrines of the incarnation, sin, salvation, and sanctification in both their personal and social dimensions. Wesley’s dying breath was anchored on the incarnation. “The best of all is that God is with us.”

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John Wesley

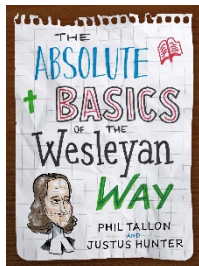


Step back and ask yourself, when is the last time you heard (or preached!) a sermon on salvation? When is the last time, you were challenged to explicitly turn your life over to Christ the Lord/leader of your life above and beyond your own transitory preferences?

Recently, the Cabinet read [Alan Hirsch’s book Reframation](#). In the book, Hirsch highlights three aspects of salvation in today’s culture – salvation related to

1. guilt, or
2. shame, or
3. liberation

All three are historically a part of the Christian doctrine of atonement or soteriology (the “way” of salvation). Furthermore, the early Christian Church, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, explicitly refused to limit salvation to simply one element or aspect of life (i.e. sin as related only to guilt) but lifted as the center of orthodoxy the greater understanding of core Christian doctrines like the Trinity, the incarnation, sin, salvation, the church, etc. It is past time we go back to teaching the essentials of our faith. (I highly recommend [Phil Tallon and Justus Hunter’s book *The Absolute Basics of the Wesleyan Way*](#) for both Sunday School classes and a preaching series.)



Firm Core / Flexible Strategies

As we move forward, a crucial way to think and pray about our future in a new spring is to guard the core while being flexible in strategy. For years, we have done just the opposite. We've been loose and even indifferent to the core while being rigid in strategy. The early church, as well as the early Methodists, held firmly to the doctrinal core of the Christian faith and were wide open on strategy. Wesley was so flexible on strategy that he went so far as to embrace field preaching, which he considered "vile" (his word, not mine).

Recently, we witnessed a fascinating example in a secular setting of a Christian guarding the core while being astonishingly flexible in strategy. It took place in a courtroom during the sentencing of the police officer who shot [Bothem Jean](#). [Judge Tammy Kemp](#) guarded the core of the law with justice in the guilty verdict but exhibited gospel-laced flexibility in offering [Amber Guyger](#) a hug and a Bible at sentencing.



Another intensely practical example might be found in our [Forward to a New Spring](#) strategy adopted at our last Annual Conference. We are engaged in an experiment moving from five geographical districts to [three district areas and buttressing our district ministry with part-time teams](#) made up of the DS, the District Administrator, an Assistant DS, a Discipleship Coach, and a Student Discipleship Coordinator. At this point (approximately five months in), it is hard to tell if this is the best way to move forward. A review of this strategy is needed next year. This review should be governed by holding to the core mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ while being flexible in our strategy relative to the number and organization of districts.

A necessity in moving forward to a new spring, regardless of whether we perceive ourselves as progressive, traditional or moderate, must involve the recovery of a working discipline in our life together. This is an uncomfortable subject in today's rabidly individualistic culture, but I invite us again to look back to our future. Indeed, I would go so far as to assert that we must recover a sense of communal discipline or we shall surely perish. Clergy, this starts by honoring your ordination vows. Laity, membership in the United Methodist Church is not a right but a privilege. Both carry commitments not just made to other humans but made to God!



I have on my desk a "class meeting" ticket," which used to be a basic part of being a Methodist. To recover who we truly are – those who are methodical and disciplined in their faith walk – will mean that our church "membership" will be less than our average worship attendance. (I note that it is the opposite today.) The earliest Christians held the concept of church discipline so deeply that they debated the issue of readmittance to worship of those who had proved apostate or unfaithful.

Please read the following carefully: grace must abound, but it cannot be cheap.

[Dietrich Bonhoeffer](#)'s profound insight should resonate with the core of our being and the practical essence of how we go about being "church" together. Pouring out his life as a martyr in resistance to Hitler and Nazis, he wrote in [The Cost of Discipleship](#)...

"Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 47

"Let All That You Do Be Done in Love"

And now I come at last to that element of which I am reluctant to speak. I have come to believe that if we are to find a way forward to a new spring as a denomination, as the Holy Spirit is leading us, we must engage in some form of denominational separation. Famously John Wesley once said,



"I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out." John Wesley, "Thoughts Upon Methodism"

Painfully, this is too often largely the truth in the United Methodist Church of today.

Our internal church struggle, which I take to be doctrinally important and serious, is damaging the witness of us all. We need to set each other free. It is time we move forward to a new spring through a grace-filled separation that would allow for shared ecumenical ministry and the possibility of a coming back together in the future. A litigious fight over property and position benefits no one and damages the advancement of the kingdom of God towards which, I trust, we all work and pray for. I believe the best way to accomplish this is through the so-called ["Protocol"](#) that will be voted upon at [General Conference in 2022](#). However, I call for respect and fairness towards all who might disagree with such a judgment.

To those of you who insist on some version of unity at all costs, I remind you that we came into being by [separating from the Church of England](#) after the Revolutionary War in 1784. I would further ask, based on a historically irrefutable reading of church history, that if you really believe in unity at all costs, then why are you not already a member of either the Greek Orthodox or Roman Catholic branches of the Church universal?

Do you recall the word of the Lord as it comes to us from the Prophet Isaiah? The first part of Isaiah, chapters 1-39, are pre-exile and call the people of God to renewed faithfulness and prophesizes judgement if they do not repent. Second Isaiah beginning at chapter 40 is a word

from the Lord to a people in exile desperately seeking deliverance and a new future of faithfulness. In the 43rd chapter, we hear this word of the Lord.

“But now thus says the LORD, . . . Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. . . . I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” Isaiah 43:1, 19

Presiding at what I believe will be my last Annual Conference as bishop, I think this is where we find ourselves no matter which camp we place ourselves in. We are wandering in the wilderness as a church, and we know what deserts are like. May the words of the Apostle Paul to the contentiously troubled church at Corinth provide guidance to us all.

“Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.” 1 Corinthians 16:13-14