

Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace
Presentation to the Orders of Elder and Deacon and
Fellowship of Local Pastors and Associate Members
Great Plains Conference
Bishop Scott J. Jones
January 15, 2014

For this meeting of the orders and fellowship in the Great Plains Conference, we have asked ourselves two key questions: “How do we live in the tension of upholding our covenant to follow and uphold the discipline of the United Methodist Church while disagreeing with some positions of the Discipline?” and “How do we respond with grace and love, both corporately and personally, when a colleague decides she/he can no longer live within that covenant?”

The starting point for my answer is Ephesians 4:1-3: “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Unity is God’s will for God’s people. Ephesians continues “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” Connectionalism is our Wesleyan way of embodying that unity. There are three fundamental, non-negotiable and basic characteristics of our unity.

The first is our doctrine. We are a body of clergy—elders, deacons, associate members and local pastors—bound together in a covenant whose purpose is the saving of souls. Elders have all made a sacred promise to preach and maintain our doctrines. Compared to other churches, we have a pretty broad understanding of the way of salvation which I have characterized as the extreme center—original sin, repentance, justification, sanctification, social justice, and the means of grace.

The second is our mission. “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs.” We have been extraordinarily successful during the last 274 years since Wesley launched the revival on April 2, 1739. We are a world-wide church embodying greater diversity in our unity than almost any other Christian church except the Roman Catholics.

Third is our discipline. We are bound in a connectional, missional covenant that focuses on four aspects: conference, episcopacy, itinerancy and the holiness of our clergy. We are a church where power is lodged in our conferring together. Decisions are made at church conferences, district conferences, annual conferences, jurisdictional conferences, central conferences and General Conference. Both clergy and laity are members of those conferences. I spent 10 years in an international dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church where I argued strongly that our democratic process of listening to God’s will and discerning it in conference is far better than the Catholic pattern of governance. Conference should be a means of grace, where the people of God worship, pray, learn, and discern God’s will for their lives and the ministry of God’s church. We think the people of God have the ability to hear God’s directions and discern it. We believe the clergy should be equally represented with

the laity. We make our decisions in conference. That is who we are. There will inevitably be disagreements, but we are loyal to the decisions we make together.

We also are an episcopal church. Bishops are given great power and responsibility. A bishop's calling is to lead the church in its mission, to strengthen the local churches, appoint clergy to their places of service, and to guard the faith, order, liturgy, doctrine and discipline of the Church. Some people in more congregationally-oriented denominations are amazed at how much power we are given. Others are amazed at how the office of bishop has been weakened. Many times people expect me to do things or fix things for which I simply do not have either the authority or responsibility. When people write me letters assuming I can settle the question of homosexuality or abortion in the church, they often do not understand what I can and cannot do. Yet I am convinced that the quality of episcopal leadership does continue to matter greatly to our overall vitality.

We are also a church characterized by itinerancy. When elders are ordained, they promise to go wherever the bishop appoints them. Local churches are committed to receiving whoever the bishop appoints to serve as their pastor. I have told Presbyterian and Baptist friends they would be much better off as both clergy and local churches if they had a bishop. When disagreements occur people can safely blame the bishop which then minimizes conflict within the congregation.

We are also a church committed to the holiness and competence of our clergy. When I send a pastor to serve a church, that church expects that this person will preach the faith of the United Methodist Church, lead according to our discipline, and will have the character and behavior that fits our understanding of the Wesleyan way of discipleship.

What I have just described to you should not be news. But it is worth repeating today because there is a lot of tension within our denomination and many people testing the boundaries and limits. In such a situation, we need to remind ourselves of our fundamental values and commitments.

We have for most of our history as a denomination reflected American culture. In the larger context of the culture wars in our country, we have been debating abortion and homosexuality since 1972. As America has become more polarized, we have become more polarized. As mutual respect and mutual understanding have diminished, so United Methodists have lost much of our ability to talk with each other in constructive ways.

We are a diverse, worldwide church. We are a diverse conference.

In the Great Plains Conference we have some congregations and clergy who are fully supportive of the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and queer persons and who believe that we should ordain self-avowed practicing homosexual persons and perform same-gender unions and marriages. We have congregations and clergy who support expanding a woman's right to choose an abortion.

In the Great Plains Conference we have some congregations and clergy who are fully supportive of the Church's current teaching that homosexual practice is incompatible with Christian teaching and that we should not ordain self-avowed practicing homosexual persons or perform same-gender unions or marriages. We have congregations and clergy who believe that our Church's statement on abortion needs to be more restrictive.

All of these persons are our brothers and sisters in the Lord. We need each other. We are called to love each other.

I am proud to live in a church with that kind of diversity because when I get to heaven I think a lot of those folk from both groups are going to be there as well. One way I typically teach about that diversity is to say that the United Methodist Church is a church where both George W. Bush and Hillary Rodham Clinton are active, faithful members, and I am glad to belong to a church like that.

What do you do, when over time, you realize you can no longer support the essential aspects of being a United Methodist Christian? First you have to decide how important it is to you. All of us have things that we disagree with, but some are more important to us than others. When you disagree with the church's teaching or its discipline, you can work to change it. On these issues, people have been working for decades.

If, a disagreement with the Church's teaching or discipline is highly important to you and if you have given up hope of changing the church's doctrine or discipline, you have to decide either to live with it or to leave and find another church that better expresses your understanding of the Christian faith. Over my years as a United Methodist elder, people I know have left because they do not like the power of bishops to appoint elders. Some have left because we are too liberal. Some have left because we are too conservative. Some have left because they no longer believe in the divinity of Christ. Such departures usually make me sad. I seek the unity of our church. When people make a decision of conscience, though, I respect that and wish them well. We must understand that such decisions of conscience are not taken lightly, and we must respect and care for those led to take those steps.

Over the years, even going back to 1784, The United Methodist Church has developed rules by which we live together and we continue to conference about them. We have been talking about these two particular issues for 40 years and we will continue the conversation. I believe that we must conduct the conversation according to our rules. Our missional effectiveness, both individually and as a denomination, requires boundaries and agreements about how we live and work together.

In that process, I will exercise my role as bishop to protect the diversity of our church. I will seek to protect the unity of our church. I will exercise my role as bishop to protect the integrity of our connectional covenant by enforcing the boundaries. Someone asked me "Bishop, what if 100 of us do same-gender unions?" My answer is this: "Then there will be 100 suspensions from ministry during the supervisory response followed by 100 trials." The right to a trial by a jury of your peers is fundamental to our connection and goes back to at least the Restrictive Rules of 1808. It is an important protection for

the individual and the conference of clergy against the power of the bishop. But you should know that holding a trial is a major drain on our leadership and resources. In addition to the distraction from other priorities and the conflict they cause within the conference, trials are expensive. I am told that some conferences spend \$100,000 on just one trial, and that the defendant may be spending up to \$50,000 of personal money. Yet, not to hold a trial when a chargeable offense occurs and a just resolution cannot be achieved is to violate our United Methodist identity.

I want to do everything I can to avoid trials. But that is primarily in the hands of the clergy who should remember and abide by their sacred promises to live by the discipline of our church.

How do we live together in this tension? Ephesians 4 gives us important guidance: the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, with humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love. That means mutual respect, conversation and genuine love.

But another answer is that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. If you believe that abortion (on either side) or same gender marriage (on either side) is the main thing, you are going to be disappointed in the United Methodist Church. For us, the main thing is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

I am convinced that our extreme center approach to doctrine, our diversity of social justice opinions, our diversity of theological opinions within our doctrinal commitments, our global nature, our balance of democratic governance and episcopal leadership, our commitment to biblical authority while interpreted by tradition, reason and experience and our focus on the mission of making disciples, when all put together give us everything we need for God to use us effectively in the 21st century. When we are faithful to who we are in all of these respects, we are simply amazing. God is doing great things through us.

There is a saying which I have heard attributed to several other persons who are not United Methodist but I cannot confirm the source. While it is not original with me, I am happy to pass it on. "If genuine revival is ever going to come to America, it will come through the United Methodists. They have done it before if they will only remember it. They have the right doctrine if they will only preach it. They have the right organization if they will only use it."

God has great things in store for the Great Plains Conference, and I am deeply honored to be your bishop as we move forward together including the tensions we face now.