

A NOTE TO OUR READERS: NOT A MATTER OF CHOICE

The season for The United Methodist Church to make its decision, about its way forward, has come. The Commission on a Way Forward has forwarded three (3) plans for the denomination—the Connectional Conference Plan, the One Church Plan, and the Traditional Plan—with accompanying legislative petitions (bills), to officials of the special, called 2019 General Conference. In February 2019 in St. Louis, MO, the General Conference will finally decide to adopt one of the three (3) plans, approve a plan not sent by the Commission, or reject all plans considered and maintain the status quo.

So which plan, for The United Methodist Church going forward, does Lifewatch support? Answer: The Traditional Plan. The Traditional Plan alone.

Why? Lifewatch supports exclusively the Traditional Plan because only the Tradition Plan maintains The United Methodist Church in Gospel truth regarding human sexuality. Both of the other plans—the Connectional Conference Plan and the One Church Plan—turn the Church's (including The United Methodist Church's) Biblical, over 2,000-year-old, apostolic teaching on human sexuality into matter of choice. That is, both the Connectional Conference Plan and the One Church Plan relativize historic, Biblical-Traditional truths on human sexuality. That means both the Connectional Conference Plan and the One Church Plan make room for, and protect, false teaching in The United Methodist Church. Both the Connectional Conference Plan and the One Church Plan morally accept, and protect, unholy practices in The United Methodist Church. Therefore, the Connectional Conference Plan and the One Church Plan should be disqualified from consideration. Therefore, these two plans should be rejected by the next General Conference. Hence, only the Traditional Plan can, and should, be supported by the 2019 General Conference.

General Conference 2019 does not have the right or responsibility to change the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church's doctrine and discipline around human sexuality. The last sentence of the sixth article of The Barmen Declaration (1934) says it best: "We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church in human arrogance could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of any arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans." Organizational unity, contextualization, fluid mission, disagreement avoidance, doctrinal avoidance, and pragmatism were "arbitrarily chosen" by the writers of, and by the advocates for, the Connectional Conference Plan and the One Church Plan.

The Traditional Plan is the only Biblical, apostolic way forward for The United Methodist Church. It asks a church trustingly to receive what our Lord says and does—not calculatingly to choose what some leaders think best. That is the difficult way forward. But that is the faithful way forward. (PTS)

OUR CHURCH STRUGGLE: NOT THE FIRST RODEO

We United Methodists, preparing for the 2019 General Conference and getting ready to determine the way forward for The United Methodist Church, think we have a unique situation on our hands. "This is so extreme, so difficult, so hard," we sigh. However, we easily forget that struggles, debates, arguments, crises—call them what you will—are hardly foreign to the Church being, and becoming more faithfully, the Church of Jesus Christ.

Think about the Church when Arius (256-336) sparked deep-seated controversy throughout the Christian community with his false teaching on the Trinity. To put it mildly, the Arian heresy created a real mess in the Church. There were times when it seemed certain that Arius and the Arians would win the day.

As the Arian struggle wore on, St. Basil the Great (330-379) was there. One of the three Cappadocian Fathers of the Church, he wrote On the Holy Spirit (St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1980). He called Chapter 30 a "Description of the present conditions of the Churches."

Church Struggle like Naval Warfare

Basil's description of the Church then, in Chapter 30, is vivid: "It is like a naval battle, kindled by old quarrels, fought by men who love war, who cultivate hatred for one another, and have long experience in naval warfare. Look at the fearful picture I am painting for you; see the rival fleets rushing against each other on both sides, and finally they converge in a burst of desperate fury. Imagine, if you will, the ships driven into confusion by a raging tempest, while thick darkness falls from the clouds and blackens the entire scene, so that signals cannot be recognized, and one can no longer

distinguish between friend and foe. To add more details to this picture, imagine the sea swollen whirling up from the deeps, while torrents of rain pour from the clouds and the terrible waves rise higher and higher. All four winds meet together and dash one fleet against the other. Meanwhile, some of the combatants are betraying each other; some are deserting in the middle of the battle; while others at the same time are compelled, while the wind drives them on, to urge their boats forward against the enemy. The men become jealous of those in higher authority, and lusting for power among themselves, they split into factions and begin to slaughter each other. Think of the confused and unintelligible din raging over the entire sea, from the howling winds, the splintering of ships, the boiling surf, the cries of the warrior as they give vent to their passions with every kind of noise, so that not a single word from the admiral or pilot can be heard. The disorder and confusion is beyond description, but the worst evil of all soon raises its head: once men despair for their lives, they claim license for every sort of wickedness. Suppose they are stricken with incurable sickness of megalomania; then they will not cease their efforts to defeat one another even as their ships sink into the abyss.”

Results of Church Struggle

St. Basil continues: “Now I ask you to turn from their fanciful description to the evil reality. When the Arian schism was first denounced as a sect opposed to the Church of God, did it not appear then to stand alone?...What storm at sea was ever so savage as this tempest of the Churches? It has moved every boundary established by the Fathers [of the Church]; every foundation, every established bulwark of doctrine has been shaken. Everything still remaining afloat is shaken by unsound teaching and thrown back into the abyss....Who could even list all the casualties? Some have fallen in battle with the enemy; some have been treacherously betrayed by their allies; others are the victims of their leaders’ incompetence. Entire churches are dashed and shattered on the sunken reefs of subtle heresy, while other enemies of the Spirit of salvation have seized the helm and made shipwreck of the faith....They continually pervert the teachings of true religion, sometimes by adding to them, and other times by reducing them....Inspired scripture is powerless to mediate between these two parties, nor can apostolic tradition offer them terms of reconciliation. One honest word and your friendship with them is finished; one disagreement with their opinions is sufficient pretext for a quarrel. No oath is so effective for holding a conspiracy together as common fellowship in error. Every man is a theologian; it does not matter that his soul is covered with more blemishes than can be counted. The result is that these innovators find an abundance of men to join their factions. So ambitious, self-elected men divide the government of the Churches among themselves, and reject the authority of the Holy Spirit. The ordinances of the Gospel have been thrown into confusion everywhere for lack of discipline; the jostling for high positions is incredible, as every ambitious man tries to thrust himself into high office. The result of this lust for power is that wild anarchy prevails among the people; the exhortations of those in authority are rendered utterly void and unprofitable, since every man in his arrogant delusion thinks that it is more his business to give orders to others than to obey anyone himself.”

Love Leads to Truth-telling

In that time of chaos in the Church, as a monk, St. Basil considers taking the route of silence. “[B]ut love pulled me in the opposite direction, the love that is not self-seeking, but desires to conquer every obstacle put in her way by time and circumstance. I learned from the example of the children in Babylon that when there is no one to support the cause of true religion, we must accomplish our duties alone. They sang a hymn to God from the midst of flames, not thinking of the multitudes who rejected the truth, but content to have each other, though there were only three of them. Therefore the cloud of our enemies does not dismay us, but we place our trust in the Spirit’s help, and boldly proclaim the truth. Otherwise, it would be utterly miserable that the Spirit is blasphemed, and true religion is wrecked so easily by these men, while we, having such a mighty patron and protector, hesitate to defend a doctrine which has been maintained in unbroken sequence from the days of the Fathers until now.” (PTS thanks Dr. Les Longden for these wonderful pages from [On the Holy Spirit](#).)♥

ENCOURAGING GOOD PREACHING

The 2018 National Right to Life Convention took place last June in Overland Park, KS. The National Pro-life Religious Council (NPRC), to which Lifewatch belongs, led a convention workshop entitled “Providing Support and Leadership in Churches.” During that workshop, your scribe was asked to suggest how a church member might encourage good preaching on life and abortion in her congregation. A version of the brief speech follows. (Paul T. Stallsworth)

1. Father Frank Pavone, you probably assigned the various topics to the various presenters in this workshop. So, you asked me to provide “examples of how to encourage good preaching.” Me? Giving a how-to speech? On encouraging good preaching? You gotta be kidding!

Well, it is too late to request a change of topic. So here goes.

(In the interest of brevity, in what follows, I will refer to all preachers as if they are men. There are, of course, many exceptions.)

2. Begin with this stipulation: there is a lot of bad preaching going on out there in the churches. Bad preaching lacks truth, love, and/or courage.

Bad preaching has a truth deficit. It turns away from the Triune God of the Bible, the Church’s creeds, and the churches’ doctrine. If bad preaching does speak about God, it speaks about “a God without wrath [who] brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.” (H. Richard Niebuhr, [The Kingdom of God in America](#) [Harper Torchbooks, 1959], p. 193) This is the promiscuous god who accepts everything in human experience—including abortion—in the name of “grace.” This seems to be the god of people who take their cues from The Today Show and [Oprah.com](#).

Also, bad preaching can avoid God altogether. Then it speaks only about humanity, humanity’s capabilities, and humanity’s responsibilities—not about humanity’s sins.

Bad preaching has a problem not only with truth but

also with love. Bad preaching can arise out of discontent or anger. Then the one in the pulpit behaves like he is dissatisfied with, or mad at, his congregation. Bad preaching does not demonstrate love to its hearers, and it seldom uses the word “love.”

Other bad preaching demonstrates a problem with love by debasing the meaning of love. It assumes love is nothing more than sentimentality or good feelings. It avoids like the plague the Biblical notion that true agape love sacrifices for the actual good of the other.

Bad preaching can be short on truth, on love, and on courage. It does not require courage within the preacher. Its sermons are so vanilla, so bland, that courage is not required to write them or to preach them.

Bad preaching. No truth! No love! No courage!

3. So how can you, followers of Christ and members of Christ’s churches, discourage bad preaching and encourage good preaching? Answer: by working for an increase in truth, love, and courage in the preaching of your pastor. Here are some suggestions for doing that.

First, never see yourself as a critic standing outside your congregation and over against your pastor. Picture yourself, as a member of the Body of Christ, in the congregation and with the pastor. Understanding yourself as part of the local church, and with the pastor, affects all the suggestions that follow.

Second, regularly attend the Services of Worship at your local church. Do not attend only when you feel like it. Be extraordinarily faithful in worship attendance.

Third, during the sermon, listen to the preaching and look at the preacher. Do not sit in the sanctuary and look down at your darned smart phone. Make affirming eye contact with the preacher.

Fourth, when the preacher proposes the truth, in love and with courage, offer the preacher your heartfelt thanks. You can do this at the conclusion of the worship service or during that week.

Fifth, if your pastor never mentions abortion and the life issues, you should suggest to him, in love, that he return to the sources—that is, investigate the teaching of his own denomination and the Church catholic. Also, you could give him a copy of “An Ecumenical Confession for Life” by the National Pro-life Religious Council, which is posted on the NPRC website. In these resources, he will find that what the Church has to say about abortion always includes both God’s forgiveness of our sins and God’s command to protect innocent human lives—that is, both Gospel and Law.

Sixth, remind your pastor that his calling from God is to propose the truth of the Gospel to his congregation. (Note: his calling is not to be liked by the church he serves.) And his responsibility is not to impose Gospel truth on anybody. What his church members do with what is proposed to them—affirm, reject, or remain undecided—is up to them, and on them.

Seventh, communicate occasionally with your pastor. Use these opportunities to thank him for faithfulness in his preaching and to build him up where there is weakness in his preaching. Take him to lunch. Give him a telephone call. Send him a note or an email. Do not badger him, and never become isolated from him.

Eighth, bring to your pastor’s attention the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which were often paraphrased by the late Father Richard John Neuhaus: Those whom you would change you must first love, and they must know that you love them. Your preacher, with God’s help and in God’s time, can and will preach the truth in love with courage.

Ninth, discuss with your pastor those from the Church’s Great Tradition who stood up and preached Gospel truth in difficult times and places. Moses. The prophets. Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. St. Peter. St. Paul. The other apostles. St. Augustine. Martin Luther. John Calvin. John Wesley. Karl Barth. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Martin Luther King, Jr. Richard John Neuhaus. God gave them courage. God can give your preacher courage.

Tenth, offer to help your pastor prepare a sermon on life and abortion. Or perhaps you could volunteer to preach a sermon on the same topic, and set a good example.

4. In some congregations, the preacher’s sermons are greeted with shouts of “Amen!” and “Preach it, brother!” What is going on there? Congregations are encouraging good preaching from their preachers. You can, and should, do the same—in many different ways.♥

PRAYERS FOR THE PEOPLE

Father Frank Pavone is a Roman Catholic priest who is the National Director of Priests for Life and the president of the National Pro-life Religious Council. Empowered to lead the larger Church in the way of faithfulness on life and abortion, Fr. Pavone writes beautiful, substantive prayers for all Christians to employ. During these weeks to come, you might pray the following prayers written by Fr. Pavone.

Prayer as Our Nation Replaces a Supreme Court Justice

God our Father, your Son Jesus spoke to us a message of peace and taught us to live as brothers and sisters. His message took form in the vision of our Founding Fathers, as they fashioned a nation where all people might live as one. This message lives on in our midst as a task for us today and a promise for tomorrow. We thank you, Father, for your blessings in the past, and for all that, with your help, we must yet achieve.

Bless our nation as we engage in this process of transition on the Supreme Court. Give wisdom, insight, and courage to our President. Bless also the United States Senators, that they may carry out their duty to conduct a fair confirmation process based on the qualifications of the nominee. Bless the nominee whom the President has chosen for this high responsibility. And bless our fellow citizens, that they may understand the proper role of the courts and let their voices be heard in defense of the principles our Founding Fathers invoked.

Bring all of us to the day when our laws and our courts protect the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and recognize that those rights are not given to us by kings or courts, but only by you, the Lord of every nation.

We pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Election Prayer for Life

O God, we acknowledge you today as Lord, not only of individuals, but of nations and governments.

We thank you for the privilege of being able to organize ourselves politically and of knowing that political loyalty does not have to mean disloyalty to you. We thank you for your law, which our Founding Fathers acknowledged and recognized as higher than any human law. We thank you for the opportunity that this election year puts before us, to exercise our solemn duty not only to vote, but to influence countless others to vote, and to vote [wisely].

Lord, we pray that your people may be awakened. Let them realize that while politics is not their salvation, their response to you requires that they be politically active. Awaken your people to know that they are not called to be a sect fleeing the world but rather a community of faith renewing the world. Awaken them that the same hands lifted up to you in prayer are the hands that pull the lever in the voting booth, that the same eyes that read your Word are the eyes that read the names on the ballot, and that they do not cease to be Christians when they enter the voting booth. Awaken your people to a commitment to justice, to the sanctity of marriage and the family, to the dignity of each individual human life, and to the truth that human rights begin when human lives begin, and not one moment later.

Lord, we rejoice today that we are citizens of your kingdom. May that make us all the more committed to being faithful citizens on earth.

We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.♥

BRIEF COMMENTARIES ON THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH TODAY

As United Methodists, laity and clergy, continue to prepare for the special, called 2019 General Conference, the following comments might be helpful for the discernments, conversations, and votes to come.

What Kind of Leadership?

“Bishops, lead The United Methodist Church!” became a mantra of United Methodists at the 2016 General Conference in Portland, OR. Unfortunately, when many bishops heard that challenge, they gladly took it to mean that they should lead in the way of their choosing, according to their personal preferences. However, many clergy and laity who said in 2016, “Bishops, lead The United Methodist Church!,” meant to suggest in that challenge that bishops should teach the church’s doctrine and uphold the church’s discipline, as the doctrine and discipline are stated in The Book of Discipline. That is consistent with common sense. After all, bishops, who make up the executive branch of The United Methodist Church, are charged to execute or implement the decisions of General Conference, which is the legislative (and conciliar) body of the denomination.

“Bishops, lead The United Methodist Church!” It meant one thing to many bishops and something else to many other United Methodists. This is a case of groups within the church using one phrase while, at the same time, understanding that phrase in two different ways. Classic miscommunication.

Trust (and Verify!) the Bishops

United Methodists, please keep an eye on the Council of Bishops, the active bishops and the retired bishops. Since General Conference 2016, with the mantra “Bishops, lead The

United Methodist Church!” ringing in their ears, the bishops seem to have overreached their constitutional authority and have several times attempted to impose their own will on the larger church. Therefore, all United Methodists—but especially denominational journalists, General Conference 2019 delegates, General Conference 2019 officers and committees, and renewal types—have a special responsibility to monitor the actions and statements of the bishops according to their duties stated by The Book of Discipline.

“Dear editor, you do not trust the bishops? How dare you!” Well, this editor-pastor trusts the bishops. But this editor-pastor also wants to verify—and encourages many others to verify—what they are saying and doing is according to the established discipline (or government or order) of The United Methodist Church. Trust and verify is a reasonable standard.

Hypocrisy

The Commission on a Way Forward has published a series of videos, which are posted online. One of the videos features Bishop Grant Hagiya, who is the resident bishop of the Los Angeles Episcopal Area. In his brief presentation, Bp. Hagiya proposes that, approaching the 2019 General Conference, all United Methodists need to have a “heart of peace,” not a “heart of war.” Who can object? Well, this United Methodist pastor must. Bp. Hagiya, in this video, seems remarkably hypocritical. After all, for years, as a United Methodist pastor and bishop, he has refused to teach United Methodist doctrine, refused to uphold the church’s discipline, and refused to practice accountability with other bishops when they have flagrantly broken church discipline. In doing (and not doing) these things, he has increased distrust of the Council of Bishops and of the bishops, alienated clergy and laity from the church, lowered the church’s credibility, and cost the church many thousands of dollars given by the faithful. That is, the bishops’ own words and actions evidence a heart of defiance that has created waves of reaction throughout the denomination. And yet, lacking self-awareness, he turns around and just now lectures us clergy and laity about how we must—we absolutely must—have hearts of peace. Sometimes such hypocrisy is nearly too much to bear.

New and Improved?

Before and after the Council of Bishops appointed United Methodists to the Commission on a Way Forward, it was often said that, through the Commission, United Methodism needed to do something new and different to address and overcome the logjam in the denomination. But then, somehow, Rev. Gil Rendle reappeared on the scene. Bright, gifted, and engaging, Rev. Rendle is a church consultant with The Institute for Clergy and Congregational Excellence of The Texas Methodist Foundation in Austin, TX. That is to say, he attempts to apply contemporary organizational theory, business methods, and political insights to The United Methodist Church, its congregations and its other institutions. That is to say, Rendle is a “technocrat” or a pragmatist. For years, he has been selling his opinions—well, that is what he is indeed doing—to United Methodist institutions (especially Annual Conferences) across the denomination. Then he was brought in to the Commission on a Way Forward to coach its moderators and to advise (or construct?) its process.

In his video for the Commission, entitled “Understanding

the Purpose, Principles and Importance of the Work of the CWF [Commission on a Way Forward],” Rev. Rendle comes across as an organization man. He sidelines the truth, and what others take to be the truth (with clever quips like “There is no definitive answer, except for those who have a definitive answer.”), and then he bravely leads the willing forward. Trying to keep his listeners alert, he repeatedly interrupts his lectures with “Are we okay?”

Why bring all this up? Because Rev. Gil Rendle has been offering this same, old, tired recipe for being the Church to United Methodists for years. Working with the Commission on a Way Forward, he was probably not going to bring forth anything remotely new or improved.

Please Everyone?

At the North Carolina Annual Conference last summer, a One Church Plan talking point emerged: “If the One Church Plan is approved by General Conference 2019, no United Methodists (laity, clergy, congregation, or Annual Conference) will be forced to change their beliefs or practices.” In other words, the One Church Plan lets all United Methodists do what is right in their own eyes. This is a contemporary dream for contemporary United Methodists. But is that faithful to the Word of God, Jesus Christ, and the Church He established? No.

Playing with Theological Fire

The One Church Plan would remove from The Book of Discipline its language against homosexual behavior. Because of that, church teaching on human sexuality will then become a matter of opinion, a matter of personal preference. Let us be clear: this would tear at the Church’s faith. This would presume that the Word of God is silent or wrong on human sexuality, the Bible neglects or fumbles the topic, and/or the Tradition of 2,000+ years was simply wrong on the matter. Because the One Church Plan goes against Biblical teaching, well understood, it should be opposed and avoided. One need not get down into the organizational weeds to discover its other faults and unintended consequences. Passing the One Church Plan, General Conference 2019 would stain The United Methodist Church’s doctrine and discipline. Passing the One Church Plan would also raise the question: while The United Methodist Church calls itself a church, is it actually a part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church? Answer: No.

Listen!

These days there is a lot of talk about United Methodists learning to listen more carefully. That is good. All of us need to be, and become, better listeners to one another. However, first and foremost, perhaps we need to listen to the Word of God. That would best prepare United Methodists for General Conference 2019.

The Spirit without the Word

Also, there is a lot of talk among United Methodists about following the Spirit, the Holy Spirit. Who could be against that? If by following the Spirit one means that today the Spirit, without the assistance of Scriptural witness, should be consulted to guide the Church, count this pastor out. As far as this pastor can tell, the Word of God (written as the Bible and understood most faithfully with the help of the Church’s Tradition) and the Spirit of God work together.

They do not contradict each other. That has a lot to do with the nature of the Triune God, the Holy Trinity. So, let the Spirit, bolstered by the Word, lead and guide the Church!

Contextualization against Truth

Today we are encouraged—or told or commanded—to “contextualize” the Gospel. Often our betters forget that the Gospel involves the Truth and many associated truths that cannot be relaxed, even for evangelical or evangelistic purposes. If contextualization means the Church has to set aside the Truth or related truths, our answer should be, “No thanks.”

Peace and Truth

This pastor does not believe that defending the truth of the Church’s faith is a sign of a heart at war. Indeed, it takes a heart of peace to witness wisely to the truth of the Church’s faith in an unfriendly, or hostile, environment.

Our Stories and The Story

In the Church, telling and listening to our individual stories is often enjoyable, inspirational, and educational. More important, perhaps, is being formed by The Story, The Story of the World (Robert Jenson), through Word and Sacraments, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, in the Church.

Demands of Tradition

Adopt the Traditional Plan, and it will be smooth sailing in The United Methodist Church going forward. Well, no. If (when, we hope and pray) the Traditional Plan is approved by General Conference 2019, it will indeed be a new day, a new start, in The United Methodist Church. The new day might be understood as The United Methodist Church growing up into Jesus Christ, into being more fully the “one holy catholic and apostolic church” (The Nicene Creed). As opposed to the prior time, the new era of truly and truthfully being the Church will challenge all United Methodists. Bishops, like never before, will need to teach the church’s doctrine and uphold the church’s discipline. Pastors, like never before, will need to teach and discipline. Laity, like never before, will be required to learn and practice, in an ecclesiastical way, the Church’s faith.

Pass the Traditional Plan, so that we can relax. Forget it!

Respect People, Critique Ideas

Remember the rule: in challenging discussions and debates, respect the people with whom you disagree, and critique their ideas. Never, never respect all ideas and critique those who propose them. That gets it backwards.

Be Careful!

Due to recent, embarrassing incidents of sloppiness in The United Methodist Church (such as the inaccurate wording of a Constitutional Amendment forwarded to Annual Conferences), the following must be written. In the local church, at the Annual Conference, at Jurisdictional Conference, and at General Conference, check (and double check) the work of chairpersons and committees. Never assume that somebody else will take care of such things for you. Check, and double check. The United Methodist Church depends on the attention of faithful laity and clergy like you. (PTS)♥

ALERT! A BISHOP TEACHING

Bishop Scott J. Jones, of the Houston Episcopal Area, seems to be teaching, in an exemplary way, the clergy and laity in his area (and beyond) about the way forward for The United Methodist Church. For example, on the morning of April 12, he led a seminar, that included Rev. Jessica LaGrone and Ms. Leah Taylor (both of whom served on the Commission on a Way Forward), that was livestreamed. At seminar's end, Bp. Jones digitally "chatted" for several hours with those in his digital audience who had additional questions. By going to www.txcumc.org/bishoplivevideo, you can watch the seminar and read the questions and responses from the afternoon chat.

The following comments, made by Bp. Jones during the seminar, seem particularly helpful for our time.

At the 4:16 point in the video, he noted: "They [members and moderators of the Commission on a Way Forward] have now developed three plans. And I want to say their contribution has primarily been clarification. There are lots of ideas running around. Well, the Commission has examined most of those ideas.... Their best contribution here has been clarification of the options." To be sure, in a time such as this in The United Methodist Church, when there is so much information and misinformation out there, clarification is an essential contribution made by the Commission to the larger church.

At 4:28, Bp. Jones made a revealing, personal comment: "I see myself as a teacher. That is part of what bishops are supposed to do. That is my spiritual gift, quite frankly. And I want to spend the time between now and February [2019] helping people understand the pros and cons of each of the three models. It is not my job to tell you which model to vote for—if you are a delegate [to General Conference 2019]—but to take the conversation to a deeper level." The more Bp. Jones teaches, the better off The United Methodist Church will be. He should be encouraged by many to continue teaching from the deep well of United Methodist doctrine and discipline. His teaching will help to move the church forward in the most faithful way. (PTS)♥

BISHOPS HUMBLD

May of this year was a momentous month for The United Methodist Church. The momentous month of May for Methodists! Also, it appeared to be a difficult month for some United Methodist bishops.

First, on May 4, the Council of Bishops (COB) approved a motion and a rationale, based on the work of the Commission on a Way Forward, regarding what the COB would report to the special, called 2019 General Conference. In its motion, the Council recommended the One Church Plan to the General Conference. The One Church Plan, if approved by General Conference, would create many choices—regarding human sexuality, marriage, and ordination—throughout The United Methodist Church. That plan is favored by a majority of bishops on the Council of Bishops. However, late in its week-long meeting, the Council voted to include the Traditional Plan (which earlier appeared to have been set aside), along with the Connectional Conference Plan [with "branches"], in its motion and

rationale. In other words, the Traditional Plan—which maintains historic Christian teaching on human sexuality, increases disciplinary accountability throughout the church, and offers a "gracious exit" to those who could not abide by the church's doctrine and discipline—was taken from the shelf, and returned to the table, by a few bishops. That just might have been dismaying to other bishops.

Second, in the two weeks that followed the Council's adoption of its motion and rationale, various bishops reported to their episcopal areas contradictory understandings of the motion and rationale they had adopted. That called for a clarifying May 18 press release from the Council. Might there have been a little egg on the faces of the Council and some of its bishops?

Third, on May 25, the Judicial Council ruled that the called 2019 General Conference can receive petitions (i.e., legislative bills) from United Methodist laity, clergy, and organizations; such petitions can be acted on by the General Conference only if they are found by the General Conference (or its committees) to be "in harmony with the purpose stated" in the call to hold a special General Conference—or if two-thirds of the delegates of General Conference vote to consider them (Par. 14, [The Book of Discipline](#)). Bishop Bruce Ough had argued, before the Judicial Council during a May 22 oral hearing, for a restriction of such petitions. Following [The Book of Discipline](#), the Judicial Council refused to follow the legal reasoning of Bp. Ough and will allow General Conference to receive and consider more, not fewer, petitions. That is to say, the 2019 General Conference will more fully practice United Methodist democracy and will not be restricted in its work by apparently overreaching bishops—who evidently wanted to project their executive authority into the legislative realm, which would have been a violation of the denomination's separation of powers. That is for the good.

Last of all, for months, the Council of Bishops had been presuming that the Council would submit a report, with petitions, to the 2019 General Conference. After the release of the Judicial Council's ruling on allowable petitions to the 2019 General Conference and that ruling's famous Footnote 6, the Council announced it would give the responsibility to report to General Conference to the Commission on a Way Forward. (Having the Commission, not the Council, report to General Conference was consistent with what the 2016 General Conference had decided.) The Council also revised its call for the special 2019 General Conference. These changes raised some eyebrows, and some questions, throughout The United Methodist Church. What is going on at leadership levels of the denomination?, many must have wondered.

Four times bishops seem to have overreached. Four times bishops seem to have generated push back. Four times bishops seem to have been humbled.

It appears that The United Methodist Church is staying true to its polity. General Conference 2019, through the mechanisms and mysteries of its democracy—not the Council of Bishops!—will be speaking for The United Methodist Church. Again, General Conference 2019—hopefully led by Jesus Christ, the Head and Lord of the Church, in the power of the Holy Spirit—will speak for The United Methodist Church. Thanks be to God. (PTS)♥

THE MINISTERIAL ORIGINS OF THE ONE CHURCH PLAN

It is no secret that a majority of the bishops on the Council of Bishops want the 2019 General Conference to adopt the One Church Plan. After all, some are blatantly lobbying for it. That plan would remove basic Christian teaching on human sexuality from The United Methodist Church's Book of Discipline. Therefore, on matters related to human sexuality, this plan would attempt to give annual conferences, congregations, and clergy whatever they prefer on teaching (moral approval of homosexual activity or not), on marriage (same-sex marriage or not), and on ordination (of those practicing homosexuality or not). The One Church Plan would create, in a word, choices.

The One Church Plan just might have ministerial origins. Revelation, Biblical theology, church doctrine, social-science studies, or extensive interviews are not required to figure this out. Simple common sense will do. Let's give it a try.

The One Church Plan is advocated by most—though certainly not all—bishops. Bishops, most probably, once pastored what we used to call “high-steeple churches”—that is, larger, more visible, more prestigious churches. Interestingly, many clergy who pastor today's “leading churches” (as they are sometimes called) are also strong proponents of The One Church Plan. Think Rev. Adam Hamilton and his Uniting Methodists group of “centrists.”

Now stay with me. Those who “successfully” pastor large, visible, prestigious United Methodist congregations somehow learn—before, or on, the job—to please as many of their church members as possible most of the time. They find a way to negotiate the divisions, to compromise their way through the divides. As masters of congregational compromise, they come to think that, because of their lessons in compromise learned at the congregational level, they have the best way for the entire United Methodist Church to move

forward: compromise to keep the denomination unified. Well, many of exactly those pastors are, in the fullness of time, elected by Jurisdictional Conferences to the office of bishop. So they take their craft of compromise to the Council of Bishops, put it to work in their episcopal areas, and assume it while developing, discussing, recommending, and promoting the One Church Plan. Whether in a large local church or on the Council of Bishops, these clergy practice compromise. They attempt to please the greatest number of United Methodists, try to offend the least number, and somehow manage to keep things holding together and moving forward.

The problem with this method of ministering is that these pastors and bishops never did learn the art of teaching the Church's faith when that faith was out-of-step with the culture. They never did learn to swim against the stream, so to speak. They did not learn to propose, in a winsome way, the truth of the Church's faith. Instead, they concentrated on winsomeness, and they let go of Christian truth.

That is exactly what the One Church Plan attempts to do. It tries to please as many United Methodists as possible by allowing us to make our own choices about human sexuality, marriage, and ordination. But is this really and truly Christian ministry? Or is this merely pandering to the preferences of each of us? (PTS)♥

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

•The Council of Bishops recommends the One Church Plan to the special, called 2019 General Conference. The Council's recommendation is often justified by The United Methodist Church's mission: “The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Local churches and extension ministries of the Church provide the most significant arenas through which disciple-making occurs.” (Paragraph 120, The Book of Discipline [2016]) The bishops' thinking is that the deletion of the

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church's current teaching on human sexuality would make United Methodist ministry more flexible, more adaptable, more accommodating to more places and to more people.

The United Methodist Church's mission statement is based on Jesus Christ's Great Commission to the Church catholic, which reads: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20a, NRSV)

So, we can gather that to "make disciples of all nations" involves baptizing them in the Name of the Trinity and "teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." (Jesus' words) But the Council of Bishops would prefer to do it its way. The Council wants The United Methodist Church to relax the teaching of Jesus on human sexuality (found in Matthew 19:5-9 and Mark 10:6-9) and therefore make the Church's teaching more acceptable to today's world. Sorry, but it does not work that way.

● In an unpublished, untitled article, Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker (retired) notes that "Athenagoras [133-190 A.D.] was a philosopher in Athens who converted to Christianity." Athenagoras, according to Bp. Whitaker, "attacks the polytheists' stories about the immoral behavior of their gods, who are poor models for how to live. Christians follow the teaching of the Logos, God's Son who became a man. Christians are known for their self-control and chastity, men and women marrying 'according to the laws laid down by us' and 'for the purpose of having

children.' Indeed, you would find many among us, both men and women, growing old unmarried, in hope of living in closer communion with God' (Embassy 33). Jesus' teaching against looking at another with lust and against divorce are quoted by Athenagoras in Embassy 32 and 33, although without mentioning the name 'Jesus.' He condemns 'the adulterers and pederasts' who 'feed upon human flesh' and who violate the moral standards of even the Roman Empire, and also 'those women who use drugs to bring on an abortion' whereas Christians 'regard the very fetus in the womb as a created being, and therefore an object of God's care' (Embassy 34)."

● "When one is delivered from a duty, one is less free; one is shackled to one's own evil impulses." This truthful comment was made by Marcel Proust (1871-1922), a French novelist. ("State Irreligion," 06.18.18, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2018/06/state-irreligion>, accessed on 06/19/18)

● *Magna est veritas, et prevalebit.* "Truth is most powerful, and will ultimately prevail."♥

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