

SPECIAL REPORT

Lifewatch, December 1, 2011

CORRESPONDENCE WITH SEVERAL BISHOPS ON THE CHURCH AND HOMOSEXUALITY

The June 2011 issue of Lifewatch contained a copy of the following April 29th letter. This letter was sent to each bishop, active and retired, in The United Methodist Church. It generated several responses, including the letters from bishops that appear below. (Please know that the bishops who wrote the letters below granted permission to publish their letters.) My responses to the bishops' responses are also reprinted below. It is my hope, accompanied by prayer, that the publication of this set of letters will encourage our bishops to teach the Church's faith, among the people called United Methodists, on matters related to human sexuality. (PTS)

April 29, 2011

Dear Bp.....:

Easter grace and peace to you. As a brother in Christ by baptism and as an elder in the North Carolina Conference, I am grateful to you for reading and considering what follows.

The April 6th Leadership Summit reviewed the Call to Action Steering Team Report. The summit's panelists repeatedly referred to the report's "*adaptive challenge for The United Methodist Church*," which is "*to redirect the flow of attention, energy, and resources to an intense concentration on fostering and sustaining an increase in the number of **vital congregations** effective in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.*" (p. 8, emphases in the original) Near the end of the third hour of the summit, Bishop Rosemarie Wenner restated the "adaptive challenge" in her own words: "It is a shift in the culture of the church, most of all. It's a shift in the faith-bound trust which we [bishops and other leaders] in the West [can] regain, because we ask each other serious questions, and we are committed to answer those questions...[I]t's good that we remind ourselves of these questions: how to change the culture [of the church], being less political and more Christ-centered and related to each other and to people in the world of God." (emphases added)

Whatever language is used—"redirect[ing] the flow of attention, energy, and resources..." (Call to Action Steering Team Report), "chang[ing] the culture [of the church], being less political and more Christ-centered" (Bp. Wenner), or simply changing the church's status quo—a compelling call for serious change in the church is being advanced.

But how does the church change? Serving as a pastor, I have come to observe this simple principle: when church leaders change, the church changes. So, when church leaders repent, the church is more likely to repent. When church leaders are faithful to Christ, the church is more likely to be faithful. Therefore, I believe that if the Council of Bishops changes for the good, The United Methodist Church will, by the grace of God, change for the good.

How must the Council of Bishops change? The Council now seems to be held in check by what might be called a covenant of collegiality. Conceived in good intention and described by The Book of Discipline (Par. 427.1-2), this covenant appears to be preventing the Council from teaching the church's own teaching, which needs to be taught and heard today.

To be more specific, the unwillingness of the Council of Bishops to teach truthfully and lovingly the Church's faith on matters related to human sexuality, which are potentially schismatic, is now harming The United Methodist Church. (At other times, there have been, and will be, different challenges facing the church.) As you well know, thirtysomething retired bishops recently issued a statement calling for the church to accept into ordained ministry those who practice homosexuality. In response, a Council of Bishops' officer released a brief statement about "Holy Conferencing" and "living within the covenant defined by our Book of Discipline." But the Council did not teach the faith, or defend the discipline, of the church. Because of this unwillingness to teach and defend, church "attention, energy, and resources" continue to be needlessly squandered in skirmishing; the church remains highly politicized; and real change in the church is delayed.

So, the problem in our church is that the Council of Bishops is not teaching the Church's faith to United Methodists, clergy and laity. An accompanying problem is that bishops in dissent from church teaching are aggressively promoting their opinions.

Though the Council of Bishops is divided on matters related to human sexuality, it could and should work to transcend this division. The Council could establish a teaching process: first, the Council could teach the Church's faith; then dissent (perhaps from retired bishops) could be heard; and finally the Church's faith could be defended. This process would exercise the Council's teaching office and recognize the church's authoritative position that bishops would be expected to honor.

The Council of Bishops "is charged with the oversight of the spiritual and temporal affairs of the whole Church..." (Book of Discipline, Par. 427.3) Bishops are obligated, by vow, "to guard the faith, to seek the unity, and to exercise the discipline of the whole Church." (The United Methodist Book of Worship [1992], 703) Today's pedagogical silence of the Council and most bishops does nothing but deepen and widen the current of distrust that runs through the denomination.

I believe that, more than anything else, The United Methodist Church needs a Council of Bishops that is, and bishops who are, first, last, and always servant teachers of the Church's faith. Without the loving truth of the Church's faith, The United Methodist Church will continue business-as-usual—no matter what changes, under the Call to Action banner, are attempted.

Therefore, I pray to God and I plead with you: help the Council to find its God-given teaching voice on matters related to human sexuality. Admittedly, that will be difficult—but, by God's grace, doable. It will require courage and boldness, but God provides what the Church and her leaders need.

I welcome further conversation. Let us all strive to be faithful, to Christ and His Church, in all things.
In Christ, (The Rev.) Paul T. Stallsworth, Pastor

I. BISHOP MICHAEL J. COYNER

Bp. Coyner, the episcopal leader of the Indiana Area of The United Methodist Church, dictated the following letter, which was "stamped in his absence to avoid delay."

May 10, 2011

Dear Paul:

Thank you for your letter of April 29th and your concerns about the lack of leadership in the Council of Bishops in teaching about issues of sexuality.

While I do agree that the Bishops may be at fault for not doing a better job of teaching the Church's stance, as you can imagine that is not an easy topic for the Bishops to deal with, any more than it is for the rest of the Church. In fact, on the Council of Bishops, we are more focused on helping the Church develop more and effective vital congregations, because we believe that is where disciples are made and where the world is best transformed.

Thanks for letting me know your thoughts on this issue. I wish you well in your continuing ministry.

Yours in Christ,

Michael J. Coyner

May 13, 2011

Dear Mike:

Easter Season grace and peace to you and yours.

Truly thankful am I for your letter of May 10th. Good to hear your response to my letter of April 29th.

Your letter accurately reflects the "adaptive challenge" that the Council of Bishops has adopted and articulated—turning from the great debate in The United Methodist Church toward the development of vital congregations to make disciples for the transformation of the world. However, Mike, I believe that the Council's unwillingness to teach on human sexuality is demoralizing (literally and figuratively) congregations that might otherwise be increasing in vitality. The Council and the congregations are linked. If the Council is faithful to God and the Church's faith, the congregations are more likely to be faithful to God and the Church's faith. (Apologies for underlining. Bad manners.)

Mike, you could be an important part of helping to turn this ship around. It is simply a matter of truthful, loving teaching. But it is up to you and up to the Council. Avoid the teaching, and the denomination continues to drift.

Be faithful.

In Christ, (The Rev.) Paul T. Stallworth, Pastor

II. BISHOP SCOTT J. JONES

Bp. Jones is the episcopal leader of the Kansas Area of The United Methodist Church.

May 10, 2011

Dear Paul:

Thank you for your letter of April 29 offering me counsel about how I and other members of the Council of Bishops ought to lead the church and exercise our office. You make many cogent points on issues about which I have been thinking for years. I have read and pondered your letter and will remember your advice.

Blessings on you and your ministry in this Easter season.

Grace and peace,

Scott J. Jones

16 May 2011

Dear Scott:

Easter Season grace and peace to you and yours.

Thank you for your May 10th note, which arrived here this afternoon.

Your reply was a thoughtful, gracious, and subtle reminder, whether you intended it or not, that

every once in a while I should answer the question, Who are you, Pastor Stallsworth, to be raising these points, and making those arguments, to bishops and the Council of Bishops? I answer by remembering that the points and arguments I make tend to be theological and moral, and today few in our denomination seem to be offering theological-moral counsel to the larger church. Indeed, at the risk of sounding arrogant, methinks the truth and the service of the truth are at stake in the church today.

I have no doubt that you have been thinking long and hard about the challenges facing The United Methodist Church today. Compared to you, I certainly seem like a Johnny-come-lately. However, the privilege of working with Richard John Neuhaus in the 1980s probably played a large role in encouraging this pastor to thinking about the larger Church.

Scott, as you know, I am calling for one thing: for the Council of Bishops and the bishops to teach the truth of the Church's faith to The United Methodist Church. That, I believe, by the grace of God, will begin to renew the church. Anything short of that—for example, simply reading, pondering, praying, remembering, and/or discussing the denominational problems at hand—will fall short of the one thing needful. Right now, methinks, The United Methodist Church cries out for public, reasoned, loving, Biblically based, Traditionally shaped, Christ centered, and Spirit driven teaching from the Council and the bishops. That is all. That alone.

If you believe a portion of my challenge is on target, you might begin calling together a small group of bishops, with similar concerns, who might commit to attempting to lead the Council to teach. That would be a first, but significant, step.

Thank you for putting up with my correspondence.

Be faithful.

In Christ,
(The Rev.) Paul T. Stallsworth, Pastor

III. BISHOP DON OTT

Bp. Ott is a retired episcopal leader in The United Methodist Church. He replied to the April 29th letter with an email.

May 20, 2011

Dear Pastor -

I write to let you know that I received your letter of April 29 and read it.

I am grateful for your thoughtful approach and your obvious care for our denomination and the witness we make in every statement and action.

While we share ministry as baptized and ordained leaders, we are not sharing convictions on the matters you have raised.

Most sincerely,
Don Ott

May 21, 2011

Dear Bp. Ott:

Easter Season grace and peace to you and yours. Thank you very much for your May 20 email and for reading my April 29 letter. Also, I am grateful for your general commendation of the effort. As you note in your email, we do indeed “share ministry as baptized and ordained leaders” in The United Methodist Church. Even your statement—“we are not sharing convictions on the matters you have raised”—is accurate.

However, to this pastor, the word convictions is troubling. On matters related to Christian morals and ordination, not everything is a “conviction.” “Conviction” suggests a personal preference or opinion, strongly held and sometimes asserted. Several issues raised by the letter have to do with Christian truth; and that truth, methinks, is the Church's privilege to serve and embody. In the Church, truthfulness and truthful practice should never be occasions for self-righteousness or lovelessness. Truthfulness and its practice are occasions for transformation and hope.

Bp. Ott, methinks it is time for the Council of Bishops to lead The United Methodist Church in sorting through these issues. The Church's teaching, which connects to truth and love, has been too long

neglected in United Methodism; and our church's dissent has been trying to fill the void, which adds to the confusion now in our denomination.

Be faithful, to Christ, for the sake of the world.
In Christ, (The Rev.) Paul T. Stallsworth, Pastor

IV. BISHOP ANN BROOKSHIRE SHERER-SIMPSON

Bp. Sherer-Simpson is the episcopal leader of the Nebraska Area. She requested that her correspondence not be reprinted. However, below you will find my response to her letter.

May 21, 2011

Dear Bp. Sherer-Simpson:

Easter Season grace and peace to you and yours.

Thank you for your May 17 note, which arrived here today, and for your careful reading of my letter of April 29.

In your cordial note, you thanked me for...[offering my personal position on homosexuality and the church]. While appreciating the good-naturedness of your comment, I am not sure this pastor was simply sharing his opinion. The position of my letter is based on the doctrine and discipline of The United Methodist Church—which is derived from the Bible, confirmed by Tradition, reinforced by reason and experience, and consistent with historic and ecumenical Christianity. This is not to claim that this pastor is correct, but that God provides for The United Methodist Church through the Great Tradition of the Church universal.

Again, the Council of Bishops and the bishops are called to teach the truth to The United Methodist Church—just like they did, after a hesitation, during the days of the Civil Rights Movement.

Be faithful, to Christ and His Church, for the sake of the world.
In Christ, (The Rev.) Paul T. Stallsworth, Pastor

V. BISHOP JACK M. TUELL

Bp. Tuell is a retired episcopal leader in The United Methodist Church.

May 10, 2011

Dear Brother Paul:

Thank you for your letter of April 29th. I did not get it until I returned from the COB [Council of Bishops] meeting at St. Simons. I presume the letter was sent to all bishops.

I want to thank you for your message, which was an earnest and thoughtful call to all of us to be more faithful to one of our major responsibilities—that is, the teaching office.

You may be right in your evaluation. My guess is that most of the active bishops are feeling under the gun to give leadership in the missional task of “making disciples for the transformation of the world.” In fact, one of the active bishops expressed this on the floor at our recent meeting, somewhat taking to task us retired bishops who had made our recent statement on homosexuality. It was as though in the limited time bishops have together in the COB, that it is distracting from the main mission to have this subject seem to displace their main endeavors.

This points to a structural problem I have been working on for the last 30 or so years—the expectations of the Church for the “general superintendency” part of our job are very great but the structures in place for responding to those expectations are woefully inadequate. The result is that the time and energy of bishops are consumed by their “residential” responsibilities, and the work of “general superintendency” does not get done.

We took a major step at our meeting toward improving this picture when we asked General Conference to amend the Constitution to allow for a full-time president of the COB.

In the meantime, issues related to human sexuality are felt by many of us, and we feel spiritually compelled to state our understanding of the scriptures in the issues before us.

What gives this all some urgency for me is that in my local church, where I sing in the choir, some of the main “pillars” of the church are gay and lesbian persons. These are deeply committed Christians.

One stands next to me in choir and keeps the bass section on key. Another heads up Adult Education and recently recruited me to lead a six-week Lenten study on “Fundamentals of Methodism,” using Rev. Don Haynes recent book on the subject. These are deeply committed Christians you would love to have in your church. But they are also deeply hurt that their church considers them less than fully Christian and fully United Methodist. This is part of why I am doing all I can to persuade the General Conference in 2012 to make changes in our present stance.

I did not intend this letter to be this long—but I did want to respond to your concerns which you ably put forward.

My best wishes and prayers are with you in your ongoing ministry.

Peace and love,
Jack Tuell

14 May 2011

Dear Bp. Tuell:

Easter Season grace and peace to you.

Thank you for your May 10th letter, which arrived here today. I am grateful to you for your engaging response to my April letter, which was indeed sent to all the members of the Council of Bishops.

Active bishops should be “feeling under the gun to give leadership” to The United Methodist Church. But their first task in giving leadership, I believe, is teaching and defending the faith—not rushing out to try to increase the number of vital congregations in the connection. If the Church’s faith is not taught and defended, what kind of congregational vitality are we imagining? If the Church’s faith is not taught and defended, what kind of disciples are being made by the allegedly vital congregations? And what kind of world transformation are we talking about?

We should acknowledge that teaching and defending the Church’s faith actually helps to create vital congregations. Bishops who demonstrate doctrinal leadership would renew pastors and congregations throughout the connection in their various ministries. For example, were the active bishops to challenge, in public, the retired bishops now in dissent, the whole church would be jolted, and very honest conversation (in which the church’s official teaching and practice could be well taught) could develop.

There may be a structural defect in the Council of Bishops. Methinks that the covenant of collegiality is so powerful that it domesticates the present president of the Council, so that the president will not get out front the Council to lead through difficult areas. Exactly the same problem could occur even if General Council decides to have a full-time president of the Council. The collegiality of the covenant appears to be quite intoxicating and, in this case, debilitating.

Then there is the matter of men and women (and boys and girls), in our churches, who practice homosexuality. I understand that is the reality. However, as the church responds to other sins that are a part of the human predicament, the church must teach and preach the truth in love about homosexual conduct. Not every Sunday. And certainly not in hate or disdain. But with love. Those who practice homosexuality will at least be made uneasy when this is done. That is okay. All of us get uneasy when our sins are brought under God’s forgiving and freeing Word. (And where is it written that our life together in the church always involves feeling good?) Those who practice homosexuality cannot be given the ability to silence the church’s loving truth on human sexuality. That would be the exercise of a soft, well intentioned totalitarianism. The United Methodist pulpit must be free, again, to serve the truth in love.

Thanks for putting up with this letter and the earlier one.

In Christ, (The Rev.) Paul T. Stallsworth, Pastor

May 19, 2011

Dear Brother Paul:

Thank you so much for your reply to my recent letter. It was not necessarily expected, but it was much appreciated. I appreciate the seriousness with which you take the message of the Gospel, even while differing from your interpretation of some of it. I really believe we would be of one mind on large portions of it.

Also, in responding to your letter, I don't mean to put you under obligation to reply. You are a busy pastor with a heavy load of responsibility, while I am an old bishop (87) with not so much on my plate any more. Also, I believe neither of our minds is likely to be changed, even though I believe that this kind of interchange does help one person to a better understanding of another person's point of view. And that, in itself, is a good thing.

In response to your cogent critique of "feel good" preaching and teaching, I couldn't agree more. I feel the Christian Church today has largely yielded to this temptation. Although the objective content of such preaching differs widely, it largely reflects the local or regional mores and prejudices of congregations. It seldom challenges or confronts them.

Your letter makes it clear that on the issue of homosexuality, the basis of our difference of opinion is the same as that prevalent throughout The United Methodist Church: the nature of homosexuality. That is, you express the view that two people of the same gender who fall in love with each other and commit their lives to each other are committing sin. If such a couple came to you seeking membership by profession of faith, you would presumably require them to repent of their sin and give up the living arrangement before you would accept them as members. On the other hand, I believe that homosexuality is an identity; that it can no more be changed than the color of a person's eyes; ergo, to penalize people for it is a violation of both God's love and God's justice.

Granted, there is much mystery about it, even as there is about heterosexuality and all its various expressions, some of which are good and some of which are evil. In regard to the several Biblical injunctions, they sound pretty sweeping. But we have no idea what particular kind of happening, incident, or experience prompted the Biblical writers to write as they did. To conflate these few words into a blanket condemnation of any kind of long term loving relationship between two people of the same gender seems to me like an overreach, especially in view of the centrality of love in the New Testament.

May this Eastertide be a blessed one for you and yours.

Love, peace and justice,
Jack Tuell

May 25, 2011

Dear Bp. Tuell:

Easter Season grace and peace to you and yours.

Thank you for your May 19th letter, which arrived here yesterday. I am grateful for the kind comments, regarding yours truly, that run throughout your letter.

Methinks the Bible's several references to homosexual behavior—when taken within the moral vision of the Bible and within the Great Tradition of the Church—do indeed make for Church teaching on this matter. The few number of references in the Bible probably stems from the widespread, enduring conviction, in Israel and in the Church, that homosexual behavior is immoral and against God's will. This is challenged, as you indicate in your letter, by the modern claim of homosexual "identity." But the Bible is not concerned with the motivation or origin, within the person, for his or her homosexual behavior; rather, the Bible simply stands against the behavior.

People who practice homosexual behavior are created by God in God's image and likeness. No doubt about that. However, their sexual practices are against God's will; even so, such practitioners can be forgiven and transformed by the powerful grace of the Triune God.

This is not to suggest, in any way, that Church and society are "fine and dandy" on sexual issues other than homosexuality. Quite the contrary. The Church and society are, God have mercy, in a kind of sexual chaos. That is why clear, compelling, truthful Church teaching—in word and deed—is so important to us here and now.

Indeed, the New Testament puts a strong emphasis upon love. (However, I tend to agree with Dr. Hays who notes that the death and resurrection of Jesus, not love, is the center of the New Testament.) However, love, as an idea and reality, is not infinitely elastic. Our loves—including mine—are subject to Biblical, doctrinal, and theological evaluation, methinks.

Be faithful, to Christ and His Church, in all things.

In Christ, (The Rev.) Paul T. Stallworth, Pastor

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