

CHRIST BUILDS THE CHURCH, THE CHURCH CONFESSES CHRIST

“But it is not we who build. He wills to build the church. No one builds the church but Christ alone. Whoever is mindful to build the church is well on his way to destroying it; for he will build a temple to idols without wishing or knowing it. We must confess—he builds. We must proclaim—he builds. We must pray to him—he builds. We do not know his plan. We cannot see whether he is building or pulling down. It may be that the times which by human standards are times of collapse are for him the great times of building. It may be that the times which from a human point of view are great times for the church are times when it is pulled down. It is a great comfort which Christ gives to his church: you confess, preach, bear witness to me, and I alone will build where it pleases me. Do not meddle in what is my province. Church, do what is given to you to do well and you have done enough. But do it well. Pay no heed to views and opinions, don’t ask for judgments, don’t always be calculating what will happen, don’t always be on the look-out for another refuge! Church, stay a church! But church, confess, confess, confess! Christ alone is your Lord, from his grace alone can you live as you are. Christ builds. And the gates of hell shall not prevail against you.”—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords (London: Collins, 1970), p. 212 [as quoted by Forum Letter, March 2021, p. 1] ♥

OBEDIENCE TO CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH: STANDING UP TO BISHOPS

The ministries of several bishops in The United Methodist Church seem to be out of control. The bishops appear to be using self-grasped power (as opposed to their God-given authority) against traditionalist congregations and pastors. Through the apparent maneuverings of power, Bishop Ken Carter (Florida Episcopal Area), Bishop Grant Hagiya (Los Angeles Episcopal Area), Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson (North Georgia Episcopal Area), and Bishop John Schol (New Jersey Episcopal Area) have created real messes in their episcopal areas. These situations raise the question: What should obedience look like in The United Methodist Church today?

Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M., the archbishop emeritus of Philadelphia, offers a compelling picture of Christian obedience. In his article “The Virtue of Obedience” ([www.](http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/)

[firstthings.com/web-exclusives/](http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/), 7.23.21), Chaput wonders: given the chaos in Church and society, “why be obedient to anything or anyone?”

Then he begins to respond with wisdom: “The virtue of obedience presumes that rightful authority exists. And it leads us to respect and comply with those who properly exercise it ... [In marriage, w]e submit ourselves to the needs of the other out of love—or, if we’re having a bad day, we [submit] at least out of loyalty.

“But Christian obedience is never a form of unthinking servility. We have brains for a reason. Christian obedience is an act of love. It’s a free gift of the self, and when obedience to authority becomes mechanical and excessive, or worse, if it serves a bad end, it crushes the spirit. All real love—and especially the love at the heart of a healthy obedience—is ordered to truth. Spouses have the duty to speak the truth to each other, charitably and respectfully, but also honestly, even when it’s unwelcome. Life in the Church is no different. When authority undermines itself with corruption, falsehood, ambiguity, brutishness, cowardice, or mismanagement, fidelity to the truth requires faithful Christians to resist and challenge it.” (emphases added)

Today there is an overspiritualized religion that desires Christ without the Church, Christianity without obedience. Chaput takes on, truthfully and powerfully, this Church-free way: “[W]hy do we need the Church? We need the Church because Jesus Christ founded her to be his witness, and to continue his work in the world. We need the Church because she’s the living body of Christ in human affairs. She’s our mother and teacher in what it really means to be a Christian. She’s the guardian of the Word of God. For Catholics [and for United Methodists!], she’s our sacramental home where we find the source and summit, the joy and consolation, of our Christian life—the Eucharist. She’s the community of believers, encouraging, correcting, and supporting each other. She’s the pilgrim people of God across borders and centuries, leading the human heart to where it can finally rest in the love of its Creator. And we need the Church because she’s the living memory of our redemption, our identity, and our purpose in whatever time God gives us.”

Chaput’s conclusion is striking: “The work of renewing the soul of the world is God’s, but his instrument is the Church. And the work of renewing the Church is also God’s, but he accomplishes it through us. The Church,

however our various traditions might conceive and experience her, is only as pure and strong as the faith, zeal, courage, and fidelity of her people. We need to remember who we are as a people, and why we're here—and then conform our lives to the task.” “[C]onform[ing] our lives to the task”—“of renewing the Church”—is, of course, obedience.

To repeat, Charles Chaput writes: “When authority undermines itself with corruption, falsehood, ambiguity, brutishness, cowardice, or mismanagement, fidelity to the truth requires faithful Christians to resist and challenge it.” As a United Methodist elder, I will translate and particularize Chaput’s stirring remark: When United Methodist bishops impose their will through power and, in the process, set aside truth and truthfulness, they deserve to be—they absolutely must be!—challenged. They deserve to be challenged by those who are truly obedient to Jesus Christ and His Church, including The United Methodist Church. (PTS) ♥

STATEMENTS ON THE CHURCH AND MISSION (WITH SOME UNSOLICITED COMMENTARY)

All presentations at the 2021 Fifth Global Gathering—on May 1 at Frazer United Methodist Church in Montgomery, AL—called for the Church’s missional thrust into the world. Many also emphasized waiting for the next General Conference to pass the Protocol legislation, which makes a way for the establishment of the Global Methodist Church (GMC), which can then be joined by congregations departing The United Methodist Church.

Presenters spoke from a pulpit composed of four or five white, classical columns, which held up a short, wooden lectern. Perhaps the columns signaled the Church’s Western-civilizational background, while the lectern signaled a Wesleyan simplicity.

Dr. Timothy C. Tennent (President, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KY): Dr. Tennent quoted our Lord, who commissioned and commissions His Church: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

This seminary president challenged all to join God’s mission in the world. According to Tennent, of the 24,000 ethnic groups in the 254 countries of the world, around 7,000 have yet to encounter the Gospel. He went on to urge that 10,000 new congregations be planted to reach 1,000,000 converts for Christ.

Dr. Tennent warned: “A new church cannot be built on the foundation of anger, however well placed it may be at

times. You cannot build a church with the bricks of discontented United Methodists who come into your movement. You cannot build a church with the mortar of triumphalism. None of those things will last.” So true. A new church should be built only on, and by, the word of God.

Rev. Crystl Gauld (Executive Director, Dignity Housing, Philadelphia, PA): Rev. Gauld’s sermon, on Acts 10:3-5, dealt with God spreading the Gospel throughout this world: by sending unexpected people, to unpredictable places, to accomplish unimaginable things. She recalled the ancient, “international division between Jews and non-Jews.” This division pitted the “deserving” against the “undeserving.” “Us versus them. The chosen versus the inferior. The favored versus the unseen. Those considered clean versus those who were so dirty that there was no cure for their human condition.” God called followers of Christ to breach such barriers and go behind “enemy lines.”

At the end of her sermon, Rev. Gauld started the familiar liturgical exchange, which occurs in many United Methodist worship services: “This is the word of God for the people of God.” Right on cue, the congregation replied: “Thanks be to God. Amen.” This response, *following the sermon*, reminded some in the assembly that the word of God has three dimensions: (1) The living word, who is Jesus Christ; (2) the written word, which is the Bible; and (3) the proclaimed word, which is the faithful sermon. Boldly declaring “This is the word of God...” *at sermon’s end*, Rev. Gauld invited the gathering to affirm that her sermon—by pointing to Jesus Christ and standing on the Bible and lifting up the Good News of God’s activity in the world—should be understood, welcomed, and celebrated as the word of God. While our Jewish friends might chuckle and say to Rev. Gauld, “You have chutzpah!,” she simply displayed trust (or faith) in God and obedience to God.

Bishop Eduard Khegay (Eurasia Episcopal Area, Moscow, Russia): Bp. Khegay humorously recalled: “The famous Anglican theologian and Pauline scholar, N.T. Wright, said one day: ‘Wherever St. Paul went, there was a riot. Wherever I go, they serve tea.’” The Brit was disappointed.

The good bishop went on to encourage his listeners: “We are truly sisters and brothers in Christ!”

“Let your light shine! Don’t let the noise of social media and the politics of fear extinguish your light, your friendship, and your multicultural community of faith. By living this life together, we can make God’s global vision a reality.”

Rev. Dr. Carolyn Moore (Lead Pastor, Mosaic Church, Evans, GA): “... if Jesus is not Christ for the whole world, He is not Christ for any of it.” Likewise, she could have claimed: If Jesus is not Lord of the whole world, He is not Lord of any of it.

Furthermore, she stated that “truth is not a private affair.” That is, she suggested that truth must be told, shared, and spread. Amen.

Rev. Jonathan Razon (Pastor, Baguio City, The Philippines): “As a small country representing small annual conferences, our challenge will be great as we take our stand for God’s Truth as it is revealed in the Holy Bible. But it is

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not relative truth or subjective truth; we believe it is the Truth! It is always true, no matter the region or place. Despite the challenges we face, brothers and sisters in the Lord, we Filipinos will courageously and fearlessly take our stand with Jesus Christ, who is the Truth for all time. We are expecting all of you, all of you, to fearlessly stand with us.”

He also called out United Methodist leaders, who are not rooted in the Bible, who do not defend the church’s doctrine and discipline: “We do not want to see these healthy, life-giving teachings [of the church] overruled by a small, progressive group of rich, elite U.S. bishops and clergy. We do not want to see these teachings changed by U.S. leaders who appear to be more committed to ‘virtue signaling’ to a progressive and permissive culture in the U.S. than to the time-honored teachings of the Christian faith.” He spoke truth against bishops, for the sake of the church. (According to Charles Chaput above, that is Christian obedience.)

Rev. Keith Boyette (President, Wesleyan Covenant Association, Spotsylvania, VA): He recalled several, Biblical examples of God’s people waiting for God’s deliverance: God’s first-chosen people suffered as slaves in Egypt for 400 years, wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, and endured exile in Babylon for 70 years. (In addition, the Church has waited 2,000 years for the return of Christ in power and glory!) While the people waited, God was at work. In due course, God acted for them. Therefore, Rev. Boyette enjoined his listeners always to “trust the timing of God. I have seen over and over again his timing is perfect.”

He said the Global Methodist Church is not dependent upon General Conference passing the Protocol. Passage of the Protocol is the best way toward the GMC. Indeed, passage of the Protocol is “the fair, the right, indeed, the Christian approach to resolving the impasse” in The United Methodist Church today.

“Our [the Global Methodist Church’s] unity will be in the person of Jesus—not in an institution,” said Rev. Boyette. Amen. True. However, The United Methodist Church, as divided and chaotic as it now is, remains part (though not a very faithful part) of the Body of Jesus Christ. Might that reality not give pause to negotiating a separation of the body?

Pastor Eric Huffman (Lead Pastor, The Story Church, Houston, TX): “Infinitely more harm is caused by spineless and sentimental church leaders who misrepresent the truth because they like being liked by people more than they like people loving Jesus. Nothing causes more harm.” A rousing, standing ovation promptly followed.

According to Pr. Huffman, when there is “Christian conflict,” the Church should follow the example of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). That is, the Church should (1)

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call all parties in the conflict to the table, to an assembly, so that together they can identify and state the problem at hand; (2) summon front-line witnesses to provide insights to the assembly; (3) turn the assembly’s attention to being instructed by the word of God—not by culture, not by sentimentality, not by emotions,

not by personal stories; and (4) apply the word of God, “in clear instruction,” to resolve the contemporary conflict in the church; the application of God’s word transforms the life of the assembly, the church, its clergy and laity.

Pr. Huffman declared: “The moment we surrender and sideline Scripture in favor of our feelings or our politics, we will be right back on the path to pluralism,” which led The United Methodist Church into its current mess.

Rev. Adam Hamilton, senior pastor of the Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, has written about sorting the Bible’s verses into three (3) “buckets:” an initial bucket for verses that express God’s character, action, and will for all times and places; a second bucket for verses that state God’s will for a particular time and place; and a third bucket for verses that do not point out the things of God. To which Rev Huffman fervently responded: “May we be a church of one book! One bucket! Not three! Because every word, on every page, has something to say to us. Every word on every page, from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22, is the word of God.”

Rev. Dr. Bryan Collier (Lead and Founding Pastor, The Orchard Church, Tupelo, MS): The Church carries God’s peace into a divided, chaotic world. Tertullian (Church Father, Carthage, born c. 155 and died c. 220) encouraged ancient Christians to offer each other a kiss of peace during the worship service after the prayers. He believed this simple act: (1) identified the congregation as a people of peace and (2) maintained the congregation as a community of peace (helping clergy and laity to forgive, reconcile, and get over the countless tensions and offenses that were sure to have come between them and festered among them).

Dr. Collier noted: when Americans are asked to describe their mental pictures of peace, they usually depict natural scenes—a beach, a lake, mountains, and so on ... without people! Such perfect pictures “eliminate everyone else.” They represent a counterfeit peace. God’s peace is for people, for always-difficult people.

Collier concluded: “The announcement of peace from the Church seems a little bit like the last speech of the day, in an afternoon session, telling the gathered about something they already know.

“The time for talk is over, brothers and sisters. We [as church] must embody the alternative [to current society] because Christ Himself has breathed on us and said, ‘As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.’ Shalom is fundamental to our identity; it is central to our life together. And our declaring it with our lives is essential for the healing of the nations. Amen.”

Rev. John Ed Mathison (John Ed Mathison Leadership Ministries, Montgomery, AL): “The last commandment of Jesus (The Great Commission, Matthew 28:18-20) becomes the first concern of the Church.” This was preached just before the risen Christ visited the Global Gathering through the Bread and the Cup. (PTS) ♥

A RESPONSE TO: “THE LAW OF LOVE: AGAINST CHURCH SEPARATION”

by The Reverend Dr. Stephen Rankin

In “The Law of Love: Against Church Separation” ([Lifewatch](#), July 1, 2021), Rev. Paul Stallsworth offers a compelling, theologically grounded argument against United Methodists separating from one another into successor bodies. The major device paving the way for separation, should it receive the approval of the next General Conference, is called the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation. It is the bone of contention with which Stallsworth has taken issue. Referring to John Wesley’s sermon, “On Schism,” he reminds us that in the final analysis, separation of the sort envisioned by the Protocol is evidence of lack of love, even though the framers of this document say the contrary. Since I have written in support of denominational dissolution, Stallsworth has graciously given me the opportunity to respond to his essay. The following is my attempt at an answer.

I start with points of deep agreement. Jesus Christ, crucified and raised for our salvation, is Lord of all. The Church, His Body, preaches the Word of God and celebrates the Sacraments faithfully. We are commanded to love one another as Christ has loved us. “There is ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:6, NRSV). The classic marks of the Church—one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—remain the norm. And yes, whenever divisions exist, leaders should take the long vision, as Stallsworth argues with reference to our Lord’s parable of the wheat and the weeds. In terms of a Biblical, theological understanding of the Church, I could not agree more.

I agree, likewise, with the principle of discipline according to Matthew 18, summarized under point #4 in the essay; but exactly here I start to wonder if, with our present conditions in The United Methodist Church, we are talking about what Jesus is talking about there. The explicit terms of this text set the focus on a member of the church sinning against another member. More widely, since we also recognize that Jesus is addressing His apostles who are foundation stones of His Church, we must take into account how church discipline applies to the whole body and thus take seriously Stallsworth’s remonstrance for us United Methodists to stay together.

Agreements noted, it is precisely on this point of rightly understanding and applying Matthew 18 where things start to get murky for me in contradistinction to Paul’s clarity. What if the member sinning against another member is a bishop, playing fast and loose with the church’s doctrine, and using

her or his authority to “discipline” the orthodox? We see this move happening in large parts of The United Methodist Church in the United States, and it has been happening for decades. In other words, what if the conditions inferred from Matthew 18 are in fact reversed in contemporary United Methodism? How do we faithfully obey Jesus’ teaching when, it seems to me, we are dealing with behaviors not covered by this text?

Going one step further, to call us to take the prophetic stance against unfaithful leaders rests on an assumption that, I admit, I have begun to question. Here I come to my most troubling thought. What if The United Methodist Church as a collective body can no longer truthfully call itself part of the Church catholic? In other words, what if the word church, as used in Matthew 18, does not apply? This question terrifies me. It seems alarmist and extreme. It leads me to other questions I would rather not ask. I, myself, can begin to martial counter-arguments in protest. We have an official doctrine—the Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith, John Wesley’s Standard Sermons and his Notes on the New Testament—showing that The United Methodist Church still stands identifiably within the Church catholic. Yet, our denominational history is ambivalent at best. From our inception in 1968, our denomination’s commitment to the core doctrines of the catholic faith has been questionable. I grieve to say so.

For these reasons, I think the better avenue to take is the Protocol of Reconciliation and Grace through Separation. This conclusion comes with the admission that it is a sign of failure. We have failed to be an obedient church in more ways than just countenancing schism. As St. Paul charges the Galatians, I think United Methodism as a body is characterized more by the preaching of “a different gospel” (1:6) than by the one the Church catholic upholds. The Protocol therefore looks to me more like a return to the Church rather than a separation from it.

Dr. Rankin now directs the Spiritual Maturity Project, which can be explored at www.spiritualmaturityproject.org. For twelve years, he served as the Chaplain/Minister to Southern Methodist University and as an adjunct professor there. ♥

THE BIBLE, THE CHRIST, AND THE CHURCH FOR LIFE

David Logan is an Irish Catholic layman who has formally studied medicine, the Bible, and the family. His book Protecting the Gift of New Life (2021 edition) lifts up eight “Biblical insights about human life,” which include many suggested verses: (1) “The human being is made by God in God’s own image;” (2) “God asks us to respect and love others, and to be accountable for their lives;” (3) “[t]he Bible recognizes the life of the child before birth;” (4) “[f]rom the Bible we also know that God gives some people their life’s mission even before they are born;” (5) “God’s Word places a great value on the gift of fertility,” and “[w]e belong to God;” (6) “God encourages us to love children as he loves them;” (7) “God encourages his people to live chaste lives;” and (8) “God calls every human family to be a loving community and a sanctuary of human life.”

The author also covers “Biblical insights into why some people would harm the innocent,” and they are: (9) “The Bible shows how sexual immorality can lead to the killing of innocent people;” (10) “[t]he Bible offers explanations as to why some parents would harm their children;” (11) “[t]he Bible offers us insights into why political rulers would want to promote the killing of infants;” (12) “[i]n Biblical times public opinion was manipulated to win support for the killing of the innocent;” (13) “[t]he Bible shows us how judges could abuse their power to condemn the innocent;” (14) “[t]hroughout the Bible, God is calling on pro-life people not to undermine respect for human life;” and (15) “[t]he Bible warns religious leaders that they could undermine respect for human life in various ways.”

Along the way, Logan recalls the words of St. John Paul II: “The Gospel of Life is not simply a reflection, however new and profound, on human life. Nor is it merely a commandment aimed at raising awareness and bringing about significant changes in society. Still less is it an illusory promise of a better future. The Gospel of Life is something concrete and personal, for it consists in the proclamation of the very person of Jesus. Jesus made himself known to the Apostle Thomas, and in him to every person, with the words: ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6). This is also how he spoke of himself to Martha, the sister of Lazarus: ‘I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die’ (John 11:25-26). Jesus is the Son who from all eternity receives life from the Father (cf. John 5:26), and who has come among men to make them sharers in this gift: ‘I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly’ (John 10:10).

“Through the words, the actions and the very person of Jesus, man is given the possibility of ‘knowing’ the complete truth concerning the value of human life. From this ‘source’ he receives, in particular, the capacity to ‘accomplish’ this truth perfectly (cf. John 3:21), that is, to accept and fulfill completely the responsibility of loving and serving, of defending and promoting human life....” (Logan, p. 63)

In Protecting the Gift of New Life, David Logan proposes what the Word of God, reinforced by the tradition of the Church, declares about life and abortion. In the Church—one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—these are not matters of opinion. They are matters addressed by God’s Word, with God’s love. They are matters of truth and love.

If you would like to have a copy of this book but you cannot find one, you might write to its author and request a copy: David Logan/c/o Corner House, Mohill Town, County Leitrim N41 V308/Republic of Ireland. My best guess is that a book would be forthcoming. (PTS) ♥

FOR LIFE, AGAINST SUICIDE

Matthew Sleeth is an interesting guy. Raised in a household that was near or in poverty, he was living on his own at 16 and at least once ate out of a dumpster. Partially turned, he went on to attend medical school and become an emergency-room doctor. Later, while reading the Bible, he

fully turned and became a Christian. A convinced, and convincing, Christian.

Now a practicing lay theologian, Dr. Sleeth engages the world in which we live. Consider the arc of his writing. In 2006, he wrote Serve God, Save the Planet: A Christian Call to Action; in 2010, The Gospel Accord to the Earth: Why the Good Book Is a Green Book; in 2012, 24/6: A Prescription for a Healthier, Happier Life; and in 2019, Reforesting Faith: What Trees Teach Us about the Nature of God and His Love for Us. Now he has authored Hope Always: how to be a force for life in a culture of suicide (Tyndale, 2021).

In Hope Always, more than anything else, Dr. Sleeth wants to witness to the Christian truth about life and suicide. He is deeply committed to tough truth-telling. “I’d rather somebody be mad at me and be alive,” says he. As a medical doctor and a Christian theologian, he proposes the truth in the service of preserving life. At the beginning of his case, he notes that “suicide is a disease for which prevention is the only acceptable treatment.”

The book’s second chapter—“The Greatest Depression: The Suicide Crisis Is Much, Much Worse Than We Ever Imagined”—startles the unsuspecting reader. From allegedly enlightened radio, television, and websites, we have learned that all the United States needs, to address its rising suicide problem, is more mental-health understanding, services, and prescriptions. In addition, suicide destigmatization would help. According to this conventional wisdom, the CDC was wise to cancel God and faith from its recent 61-page report on suicide and depression. According to Sleeth, this secular-mental-health-media complex’s “answer” has been repeated and followed for 20 years, and suicide in America has worsened.

“[W]e [Americans],” writes Sleeth, “are creating a world that is unlivable. As a result, our society is changing suicide from a moral wrong to a personal right. As this happens, the pain of those left behind after a suicide will be denied and downplayed, and we will begin to accept suicide as a universal human right.” (33)

To the cultural establishment that wants to legitimate suicide as a lifestyle choice, Dr. Sleeth declares No! But his No! is followed by the Yes! that comes from God. Sleeth writes as a servant of the Bible, its Gospel, its grace, its promises, and its commandments. After all, “[f]undamental to all is the belief that the Bible is the authoritative, sacred text of the faith.” The scriptural witness can encourage people to commit to life, not submit to suicide.

At the end of Hope Always, practical resources are listed—activities, Biblical verses, wise statements, hymns, songs, movies, and books that uplift, that inspire hope. They will help church pastors and members to minister to those who are on the road to considering suicide.

To his basketball teams in games that seemed impossible to win, Jimmy V (that is, Valvano, the former NCSU men’s head basketball coach), declared “Never give up!”

To those involved in the culture of suicide and to Christians who can address such people in need, Dr. Sleeth declares, “Hope always!” (PTS) ♥

SPLIT REALITY

by Rev. Mark Woods

When Rev. Stallsworth invited me to write for Lifewatch, I have to admit that I did not want to. I was afraid that I would be labeled as “conservative” and that some of my friends would question me. This is the world we live in. We are no longer together. We are divided from each other. So, at the risk of being reduced to a label, I proceed.

Last year, just before the shutdowns from Covid-19, I attended a district meeting of clergy. We all gathered together with the usual pleasantries: handshakes, coffee, cookies, and that guilt-free, plastic, sectioned vegetable plate that no one touches.

We worshipped together and sang songs we all know. No one sings like Methodist preachers. (I am biased though.) We heard a homily from our bishop and turned our attention to the task of the day: talking about the next General Conference. Some call it “The Split.” Each pastor had a chance to stand up and talk. We were invited to ask questions. But pastors do not really ask questions. We make comments under the guise of asking questions—and I am as guilty of this as any. All made valid points.

I had ministered in that district for years—since before my first appointment. I knew most of the people in that room. Some who were present helped me through the District Board of Ministry. Some helped me hone my calling. Some fostered me as I developed my understanding of the Eucharist. Some walked with me through the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry and guided my sense of pastoral identity. Some even prayed with me all the way, every month, until ordination. Some showed up at the births of my children, because they knew what it meant to be an itinerant minister with no family within 600 miles. Many of those pastors were the only people who understand what it means to walk into a contentious Administrative Council meeting. Many of these pastors called me and provided me with comfort when the tasks of ministry drove me to a lonely place. And, oh, the laughter we shared when a pastor told the story of how she misspoke from the pulpit and said a word I will not repeat here. I realized in that moment, in that Fellowship Hall, that those pastors were my family.

It struck me at the meeting that “The Split” would move us away from each other. I stand to lose some of those who have supported me. Sure, we can say, “No, you will not lose them if we split.” But they will not be at my district meetings, and they will not be at Annual Conference with me. We will not share the coffee pot in an old Fellowship Hall, while the DS pitches us the next conference-wide initiative. We will have our own polity, our own meetings, our own processes of ordination. I do not want it. If God is essentially one, as St. Thomas Aquinas and so many others argued, then this move does not put forth our best image, the image of God.

Sure, this is a sentimental and naive appeal. But sometimes naivete is precisely what it takes to be Christian and to love our family. So, to those who choose to split, if it comes to that: I am sorry from the bottom of my heart. I wish this were not so. Perhaps some wiser clergy and leaders down the road will bring us back together again, wondering

why we chose this unholy route of division yet again. But until then, as Christian de Cherge said in a letter to his executioner and his family before his death, “Perhaps, if it please God, we will meet as happy thieves in paradise.”

Rev. Woods is an elder in the North Carolina Conference, and he serves as the pastor of First United Methodist Church in Fuquay-Varina, NC. ♥

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT

- Thank you for your support for Lifewatch’s witness. Because of your financial gifts, Lifewatch can keep pointing United Methodists to the Gospel of Life. As always, your gifts to Lifewatch can be given in three ways. First, you can write a check to “Lifewatch,” and send it to Lifewatch/P.O. Box 306/Cottleville, MO 63338. Second, you can give stocks by first contacting Mrs. Cindy Evans in the Lifewatch office. And third, if you are over the age of 72, you can give a gift from your IRA as a tax-free distribution. (This means a gift [up to \$100,000 ...!] can be transferred from your IRA directly to Lifewatch and can count toward your minimum required distribution without being considered as taxable income. If you are considering giving a gift from your IRA, please first consult Mrs. Evans.) Mrs. Evans and I are deeply grateful for you, for your fellowship in Christ, for your prayerful petitions, and for your financial support.
- Mrs. Ruth Brown was the Administrator for Lifewatch during some of our earliest years in the early 1990s. She contributed “The Ministry of a Crisis Pregnancy Center” to The Durham Declaration Conference and to its book, The Church and Abortion: In Search of New Ground for Response (Abingdon Press, 1993). And for several years, she wrote a page-one column for each issue of Lifewatch. Her words were always wise and gracious.

Ruth often joked that she lives in “LA”—that is, Lower Alabama. Dothan, to be exact. So, after attending the Fifth Global Gathering of the Wesleyan Covenant Association in Montgomery, AL, Marsha and I drove to Dothan to visit Ruth. It was a memorably good conversation. Ruth was in fine form, as she joyfully recalled her years of ministry in behalf of the Gospel of Life.

She was, is, and will always be a sturdy saint—made so by the forgiving and transforming love of God through Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God for Mrs. Ruth Brown!

- Dr. Tesia L. Mallory is the new Dean of the Chapel at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, OH. She will be the preacher at the 2022 Lifewatch Service of Worship in Washington, DC. That service will most likely take place on January 21, a Friday, at 9:30 a.m. Plan now to attend with others.
- Shadow - a fable for our times is a brief booklet about Shadow the cat encountering feline buddies and more complicated human beings. It aims to teach its readers and listeners about observing nature, trusting God, choosing life, and, most importantly, seeing each human life as important. This booklet would be an excellent way to begin teaching children, at home or at Church School or at Vacation Bible School, about God’s creation—especially marriage and life.

You can download Shadow for \$4.99 at EveryLifeIsImportant.com.

- In “Planned Parenthood-trained instructor: sex-ed programs sexualize children,” written by Katie Yoder for the Catholic News Agency (July 10, 2021), Monica

Cline is the *former* sex-education instructor. In Yoder’s article, Cline thoughtfully declares: Such sexual education is “about keeping parents out of the picture and ensuring that those children not only dehumanize themselves through the act of sex outside of marriage but then ... dehumanize the preborn child through abortion.” Oppose such sex ed.

- For better or for worse, the Planned Parenthood Federation of America has appointed a group of “faith leaders” to its “clergy advocacy board.” Most are from red (for Republican) states and from the South. (Jack Jenkins, “Planned Parenthood announces new clergy advocacy board members, many from red states,” April 13, 2021, Religion News Service website) The thought of clergy being used to religiously legitimate the existence and work of Planned Parenthood, the largest provider of abortion in the United States, makes one sad. Then disturbed and moved to act.

- In public life, at the state and municipal level, pro-life activities continue to press forward. For example, several states—Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi—have decided to name January 22, 2022 as a “Day of Tears.” On that 49th anniversary of Roe v. Wade, their citizens will be encouraged to put flags at half-staff to remember and mourn the loss of 62 million unborn children. In addition, since January 1, 2021, over 500 pro-life bills and resolutions have been introduced in state legislatures; 61 have passed, been signed, and become law. Finally, the citizens of Lubbock, TX voted (68% to 38%) to declare themselves the 25th “sanctuary city for the unborn” in the nation. Sometimes the world churns for good, for life!

- In Ms. Lynn Fitch is the attorney general of Mississippi. Before the United States Supreme Court, in Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization, she will defend the constitutionality of her state’s law that prohibits elective abortion after the unborn child is 15 weeks old.

Dr. Robert P. George teaches jurisprudence, and directs the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions, at Princeton University. Dr. George writes “Roe Must Go” (Web Exclusives, www.firstthings.org, 7.1.21) to persuade, encourage, and challenge Attorney General Fitch to seek a reversal of Roe v. Wade, which knocked down all

“[S]exual education is ‘about keeping parents out of the picture and ensuring that those children not only dehumanize themselves through the act of sex outside of marriage but then ... dehumanize the preborn child through abortion.’”

state abortion laws, as she defends the Mississippi law before the United States Supreme Court.

While making his case to Attorney General Fitch, Dr. George offers up a memorable paragraph: “The pro-life

movement is founded upon two premises. The first is moral: that every human being, born or unborn, possesses inherent and equal dignity and an inalienable right to life. The second is legal: that there is no constitutional right to elective abortion on any responsible reading of our national charter; that this ‘right’ was unconstitutionally fabricated by the Supreme Court in what dissenting Justice Byron White, a John F. Kennedy appointee and a Democrat, denounced as an ‘act of raw judicial power;’ and that Roe and later cases based on it must be overturned. Reversing Roe is the only path consistent with the rule of law and basic justice.”

Three weeks after George’s article was published, on July 22, Attorney General Fitch files her brief with the Supreme Court. In it, she writes: “Roe and Casey are ... at odds with the straightforward, constitutionally grounded answer to the question presented [in this case] So the question becomes whether this Court should overrule those decisions. It should.” (Josh Hammer, “Mississippi Asks SCOTUS to Overturn Roe,” Web Exclusives, www.firstthings.com, 7.26.21)

You know that overturning Roe would return the abortion issue to state legislatures.

- These days communication among United Methodists, on different sides of the aisle, is difficult. Here is an example.

The last issue of Lifewatch claimed that Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson (North Georgia) and Bishop John Schol (New Jersey) made appointments in ways that raised serious disciplinary concerns. Another active bishop objected to the claim, because the objecting bishop knew both Bp. Hauptert-Johnson and Bp. Schol to be people of “integrity”—actually, “their integrity is beyond question.”

Well, the Church catholic and The United Methodist Church, in particular, never assume that select clergy (even bishops) and laity have “integrity ... beyond question.” That is why The Book of Discipline establishes accountability and disciplinary structures for clergy and laity when, in the course of their lives and ministries, they say or do things that mandate a questioning and testing of their integrity—and perhaps disciplining and/or punishing for their lack of integrity.

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Dig a little deeper. Perhaps, among Traditionalists, “integrity” means living according to the Church’s written and taught morals. On the other hand, perhaps, among Centrists and Progressives, “integrity” is living according to what one believes in one’s heart to be true. By that definition, bishops who ignore and oppose the church’s teaching, and who “follow their hearts,” are truly people of integrity. “I did it my way” (Frank Sinatra) then becomes a proclamation of integrity.

In this world and in this church, communication is a challenging task. So, we must work hard to communicate with each other—especially when such communication involves folks from both sides of the aisle. In the church, working hard to communicate with one another is part of loving one another. We must test each other’s claims.

• John Lomperis, the director of UMAction and an advisor of Lifewatch, has written that Bishop Sue Hauptert-Johnson is a “bully bishop,” because of her rough treatment of Mt. Bethel United Methodist Church and its senior pastor. At first, “bully bishop” seems like an accurate description, for her actions appear to be of the bullying variety. On second thought, Mr. Lomperis might have put it more strongly.

Think about it. Evidently, Hauptert-Johnson turned her God-given episcopal authority, which is meant to be exercised through servant-leadership, into power. Then she took another step: she transformed her power into tyranny against others. So in the case of Bp. Hauptert-Johnson and Mt. Bethel United Methodist Church, we

have a bishop who used her office to get her way. A bully need not have an office to bully others. Bullying can be purely personal: it involves a stronger person pushing around a weaker person. On the other hand, tyranny usually involves an office, vested with authority or power, that its holder weaponizes and misuses against others. The actions of this bishop seem to be an example of tyranny, not bullying.

• Here is a memorable quotation from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Cowardice asks the question, ‘Is it safe?’ Expediency asks the question, ‘Is it politic?’ Vanity asks the question, ‘Is it popular?’ But conscience asks the question, ‘Is it right?’ There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but because conscience tells one it is right.” (from an email from Ms. Katie Barrett, Care Net, Lansdowne, VA, 07/10/21)

• One of our faithful readers offers this quotation attributed to George Washington: “Truth will ultimately prevail where there is pains taken to bring it to light.” While respecting the first POTUS and his wisdom, we still prefer the following Latin quotation and its English translation.

• *Magna est veritas, et prevalebit.* “Truth is most powerful, and will ultimately prevail.” ♥

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